

OF TIDES AND
SNOW

DARVA GREEN

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



Of Tides and Snow is a dark fantasy romance with some potentially unsettling themes. It's intended for adult readers.

Content warnings: murder, violence from guns, swords, and knives, graphic sex, manipulation from side characters, grief, assault, on-page abortion care, body horror, self-harm, implied abuse, and mentions of human trafficking.

Please take care.

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PROLOGUE

THE MAN IN THE MIRROR

“This is cruel, even for you.”

Grimhilde uncrosses her legs and rises from her seat. Her white veil drags on the floor behind her as she steps between the cauldron and the altar. She claps her hand over the spot in the scrying mirror where my mouth should be, applying pressure to the obsidian surface.

“Did I ask for your opinion?”

I don’t answer. I know not to speak until she asks me to. Grimhilde can’t hurt me, but she can leave me alone in here for weeks on end. As much as I hate the High Priestess, I’d rather have her company than wander the hall of reflections alone for all eternity.

“I didn’t think so.” She drops her arm and turns away. “Did you check on the queen?”

“I did.”

“And does Isobel...” She never lets herself finish the sentence, but I know the question in her heart—*does Isobel love me still?*

“Yes,” I sigh. “She does, and she always will.”

I
GWEN

I live in a temple made of salt and bones. It's all I've ever known. Death is a frequent visitor to the mines below my feet, but the rich soil keeps the Kingdom of Lavinsar wealthy, and I've been taught to be grateful. On occasion, I can hear screaming from the dungeons, but there's no need to worry—the guards only carry the worst people down there to keep the island safe. Growing up, the winding halls of the catacombs were my stomping grounds for hide-and-seek; the ossuary was my playground.

A wall forms a semi-circle around the western side of the temple, blocking us off from the inland territories. To the east, the forest is wedged between the tallest tower and the sea. Pirates and other miscreants never wander into the woods—the creatures dwelling within are servants to the High Priestess.

We are safe in here, protected from the evils of the outside world. Even during the war, the temple remained untouched, unthreatened. We are safe within these borders as long as we follow the will of the Goddess and never turn against the covenant.

I've never been afraid that my own skull might dangle from a chandelier or get pressed into the crown molding above a crossed set of femurs. Not when I've done everything to make myself the perfect picture of obedience for my High Priestess these past twenty-five years.

Mind Grimhilde, and you will be safe, my mother always said. She hasn't written in three years, but I don't miss her letters much. They were all the same—devoid of warmth or gossip and boring to the core. *Obey and honor the treaty. Make yourself meek for your guardian.*

As if that hadn't been drilled into me since day one. As if I wasn't required to take history courses alongside the other pupils of the Moon Coven. I had to take notes on the peace treaty that ended the Queen's War and scribble details about the terms of the agreement with my head down. I couldn't bear to see my friends' eyes on me.

It was understandably awkward, considering my name is listed as one of the terms, but everyone seemed to forget my strange role in ending the war once we moved on to more current topics. Whispers of the would-be princess stopped shortly after we started talking about the salt mine riots and the piracy acts.

Besides, I've never shown a hint of defiance toward Grimhilde or the Kingdom of Lavinsar, so eventually, everyone stopped waiting for my mother to reclaim me and start the fight anew.

My titles were stripped at birth, and I'm a busy mouse around the temple, always scurrying to do the mundane tasks assigned to my station. It's easy to forget who I might have been when I'm doing things like carrying basins full of moon water up to the temple tower to cleanse the scrying mirror or wash the feet of the priestesses dressed in their snow whites.

Around here, I'm simply Gwen of the servant blues. I can't even imagine what it would have been like to grow up knowing I would someday be the Queen of Gentrilly. It's hard enough to picture the real opportunity of becoming a priestess when the ceremonial snow whites are waiting for me to put them on and prove myself worthy tonight.

It's almost time.

I swim up to the surface of the pond and float on my back, tipping my face up to the sky. The heat is loosening its grip on the day, and the light of the golden hour filters through the red-tinged canopy of leaves. Not so far in the distance, the temple glows like a salt lamp in brilliant shades of pink and coral.

I rest my forearms on the clay bank and kick my legs to tread the water. Absentmindedly, I touch the bone border of the swimming hole as I gaze at the tallest tower. The High Priestess spends most of her time there, coaxing the spirit in the mirror to help her weed out her enemies. I press my finger to a hollow eye socket, thinking about my own skull sitting beneath my flesh. Will I end up like this if Grimhilde ever finds out about my little slips?

The thought gives me pause, and sick panic flutters through my belly. Recoiling, I pull my hand back and rinse myself clean again.

No, I'm safe here. Grimhilde loves me as if I'm her own. That's why she's letting me prove myself tonight and officially pledge my heart to the Moon Coven. She wouldn't do that if there was something wrong with me. I make a silent promise to do better.

I hold my breath for as long as I can, letting my hair float up around me. I'm in commune with my chosen element, and magic tingles beneath my wet skin.

The water has always called to me, and sometimes I've answered with a little too much enthusiasm, unable to resist its tug. But this evening I won't shy away from it; I need to awaken every bit of magic thrumming through my veins if I'm to complete my trials and obtain the one title the treaty doesn't forbid me from holding.

Tonight I'll commit to the Moon Coven and serve the rest of my life sentence as a priestess.

I surface again, gasping for air. A pair of glossy ivory boots are waiting next to the circle of bones. The guard wearing them is bent at the waist, holding her gloved hand out for me.

"You're late," I sputter, but Shiloh's mouth quirks up in a half-smile when I take her hand. When I'm on my feet, she pulls me against her, smushing me against the cool white metal of her breastplate.

"Yes, sorry about that. A fight broke out in the mines today," she says, holding her arms out, creating space between us. The ends of her golden hair brush her eyebrows as she runs her gaze over my dripping body. "But I came as soon as I could."

"How did I know a letter saying I'd be waiting naked by the pond would have you running the moment you got off-duty?" I ask, running my hands back to the clasp of her armor. She worked so hard to pull herself from the salt mines and earn her place in the High Priestess' personal guard. I want to run my hands over her and feel the strength of the arms and shoulders that slew the wild boar at last year's hunt, but she catches my wrist and clears her throat.

"No," she says, more firmly than she's ever spoken to me. I stop immediately, and she shakes her head. "I—this is supposed to be about you tonight. Your big moment has finally arrived."

I walk my fingers up to rest on her shoulder and give her my best flirty smile. “That’s why I asked you to help me make magic for it.”

Her eyelids drop heavy, and I sink my teeth into my lower lip, leading her to the blanket where my snow whites are folded. I wipe my hands on my discarded servant blues before I pick up the new gown and hold it out before me.

“Would you like me to put this on so you can do the honor of taking it off for the first time?” I ask her, and she leans against the oak tree.

“Gwen,” she says softly, as though there’s something else she wants to add. She gets all tongue-tied like this when I tease. I step into the gown and pull it up over my hips until the transparent sleeves fall from my shoulders. The fabric is so light it floats up around my thighs when I twirl for Shiloh to see it in all of its glory. I squeal as the skirt swishes around my ankles, but when I stop, she’s not smiling. She looks pained by my display.

Shiloh’s strength has always been in her muscle and her skill with a weapon. She’s prone to shyness and blushing, so I do most of the talking when we meet up like this, but I know her expressions. I can read the lines on her face for what they are.

Oh no.

I’m being selfish. Our relationship has always been light, as effervescent as the bubbles on the tide. I know it will fizzle out just as soon as it stops being fun, but now I’m not so sure. I’ve barely given any thought to how she might feel about this, taking her support for granted.

“Shiloh,” I say, touching her wrist. The muscle in her jaw tightens. “I know becoming a priestess means we can’t wed, but there are plenty of other ways to show our dedication to each other in the future if that’s what you’re worried about. There are life-binding spells and—”

She jerks her arm back before I can finish the sentence.

“Life binds?” She backs up like I’ve suggested drinking poison together. “Gwen, I’m dedicated to protecting Grimhilde and the temple, and you are...” She sweeps her eyes over me again and winces. “You are going to give yourself to the Moon Coven.”

Hot embarrassment prickles over me as she rambles on, and my cheeks and ears warm. I know what this is. Seven years ago, when I was eighteen, Grimhilde sat me before the scrying mirror and showed me the fortune of my future. The signs were blurry and hard to decipher, but I caught

glimpses of a rolling sea, a flash of me standing in the sand, and hands reaching for my skirts. My heart swelled as a faceless lover claimed my mouth with a kiss before the image swirled away in a tendril of smoke.

"Will I have a great love one day?" I asked the High Priestess, and she cupped my face in her hand.

"No, sweet girl. You're reading it all wrong," she said with pity shining in her green eyes. *"You'll only ever have me, but if you're very good, then someday you might become the very thing you've always dreamed of—one of my priestesses."*

I know true love isn't in the cards for me, so I don't know why I cling to the hope that it might be out there when I'm getting so much more than my mother and I ever bargained for. I've been given the chance of a lifetime, and I won't let anything dull the shine of this moment.

"I was just joking," I laugh, cutting off Shiloh's speech. Waving my hands by my face, I move closer to her. "It's my nerves talking, but you can help me with those."

I tilt my chin up and she kisses me roughly. Desire pools in my low belly when she tugs my hair back to expose my neck.

"Here. Put this on," she says, holding out a strip of white linen with her free hand. She lets go, and as I'm lifting the fabric to my eyes, the setting sun glints off the edge of her blade.

"Knife play?" I muse, arching an eyebrow over the blindfold. She grunts in response, and my humiliation ebbs away as we slip back into our casual roles.

She spins me around in her arms, and I let out a breath when she presses me up against the tree. Shiloh fists my skirts and pushes them up over my thighs. I'm aching for her to touch me. I've been waiting all day, knowing my magic will be stronger for hours after I hit my climax.

Shiloh's face is pressed close to mine. Her breathing is harsh, like she's trying to hold back from touching me and giving me my release too quickly. *Goddess*—the woman usually likes to cut to the chase. The tip of her knife scrapes up my inner thigh with just enough pressure to threaten a bite of pain if I wiggle around too much.

I hold still, bracing my palms against the tree as she draws the knife back and replaces it against my bodice. Shiloh draws a straight line with a steady hand until the blade is sitting on the hollow of my throat

My heart thumps at the spot. I don't dare to take a deep breath, but a moan escapes my lips, and I try to tilt my hips toward her without moving my upper body.

A sting of pain forces me back.

"Ow!" I suck in a breath, and panic bleats through my brain. The knife digs deeper, and my body responds without thinking. I raise my hands, trying to shove my companion off me. "*Lantern!*"

The blade falls with a soft thump at the use of the safe word, and Shiloh's knees hit the ground right after.

I touch my neck before lifting the blindfold. There's a smear of red staining the linen, and Shiloh is kneeling at my feet with her face in her hands.

"Fuck!" she shouts, pounding her fists into the clay. "I can't fucking do it!"

My teeth are chattering from the rush of violence, and my hands fly up to my neck when she starts to move to her feet.

"What was that?" I whisper, hardly able to form the words. She doesn't answer for some time.

"Gwen," she says thickly. "You have to run."

I stare back at the temple tower wondering if I should, but I know I'd never make it if she wanted to harm me in earnest.

"Shiloh—" A thought hits me. "Is this the first test?" The trials shouldn't begin until nightfall, but darkness is bleeding into the edges of the dusk sky.

"No." She strides toward me. Her lips press into a thin white line when she grasps my shoulders. "The trials, this meetup...It's all a trap. I was sent to kill you."

"Trap?" The word rolls off my tongue, detached from its meaning until I speak it aloud. "But who sent you?"

"Grimhilde." I start to shake my head, but she grasps my chin and forces me to meet her eyes. "No, listen to me. The spirit in the mirror showed her how powerful you'd become, and at heart, you're still a Gentrillian. She's not willing to let you cause destruction in Lavinsar."

"I would never harm anyone," I argue. *But I could.* The thought snakes through my mind. *What if I lose control when I'm upset?*

"I know you have the fairest heart, and that's why I cannot be the one who slays you." Shadows hang under Shiloh's eyes like she hasn't slept

well in days. “But she knows what you’re capable of, and she won’t allow you to live.”

There’s a confession in her statement. I know what’s been keeping her up at night without hearing her say it outright.

“You told her about the miner,” I state, surprised at how calm I sound when the world is tipping beneath my feet.

“I had to,” she bites out. “I swore a vow to her, and you broke a Moon Coven commandment.”

“Should I have left him there to die?” I toss my hands up, breaking her grasp.

“Yes! It goes against the Coven rules to heal someone that far gone. It creates an unsustainable expectation.” She looks down. Her face is twisted like she’s going into battle, and I don’t like it. “And more importantly, if you had left him to succumb to his wounds, then we wouldn’t be standing here with both of our lives on the line.”

I hate the way my heart flutters when she lumps both of our lives together, but with her, I might stand a chance of finding a safe place to stay until I clear this up.

“Will you help me?” I ask her. “Will you run with me?”

Her tanned white skin goes shockingly pale.

“Run with you after you’ve done a hundred things over the years to show the High Priestess what you think of her rules?”

The words I’m trying to say get tangled up in a cry. I clutch my aching chest, forgetting there’s blood on my hand. Crimson fingerprints mar my new gown. “How long have you been telling her my secrets?”

“The whole time we’ve been seeing each other,” she admits, spilling the truth like scalding tea. “She asked me to report anything...unusual.”

That means Grimhilde knows about the bird and the well and that time I helped Bianca through her bout of illness. She’s known for years, and the trouble with the miner is the thing that has finally brought her judgment down on me.

“I understand that you’re bound by your vow,” I say, wrapping my arms around myself. “But where will I go?”

“You remember where my brothers live, right? Run to them. Tell them I sent you. They’ll keep you safe for a time.”

“But I can’t go alone.” I’m not even allowed to go into the village without a chaperone. My knees wobble at the thought of venturing into the

forest without someone at my side.

“You must.” She reaches for her sword and unsheathes it. Wrapping her fingers in my hair, she tugs my head back again and raises the sword up high. The movement is too quick for me to protest with anything other than a small squeak.

This is it. She’s about to change her mind and follow through on the High Priestess’ orders. I brace myself for a death blow, but the blade swishes through the air behind my head, and I’m freed from her grip.

She holds a mass of my dark brown hair in her hand. I touch my shorn locks, shocked that my heart is still beating.

“I’ll tell her I did it to buy you some time, but you need to get out of here.” I stare at her, still not quite sure how to make my legs move, but she grits her teeth and snarls, “Run now, or I’ll kill you and spare myself the trouble!”

I tear off, snatching my cloak from the branch without another glance back at the guard whose weeping follows me into the forest.

I weave through the trees with tears streaming down my face as pickers dig themselves into the soles of my feet and thorns catch on my flowing gown. The delicate fabric of my sleeves snags and rips in several places, but I keep going. I can't slow down. If I stop to breathe, the truth of the night will catch up to me, and I'll have to face it. Or end up shoved in the recesses of the tower wall, wedged between thick bricks of salt until I'm all dried out.

The cottage in the woods is my only aim, and I want to make it before the night settles in and obscures the narrow path completely. I'm empty-handed. I have no knives or torches. I came down to the swimming hole to prepare for my trials with nothing but my magic.

My magic.

I flex my fingers and I'm slightly surprised when I feel the familiar energy spark to life again. So, my magic hasn't abandoned me. I close my eyes and draw it back in, close to my heart. It's not safe to use it when I'm this volatile and unfocused. It might draw attention, and Grimhilde has eyes in these woods. A hooting owl stirring from its day-long nap might be a threat. A rustling in the brush could be a minion ready to carry news of a runaway priestess back to its mistress.

A branch scratches my cheek when I hit the archway made of two trees twined together, but I brush it off, and anticipation quickens my steps. I'm almost there. My feet hit the velvety moss carpet that rolls toward the small house where Shiloh's six brothers live. I smell the chimney smoke before I catch the lantern light shimmering through the leaves.

I only slow to a shuffle when the cream thatched-roof cottage comes into view. I brace my hands on my hips and gulp down air, trying to slow my breath. The salt burns like sand in my throat and lungs, but I've made it.

Stepping over the short fence to the unkempt garden, I tiptoe my way to the door. My fingers are curled and ready, but my initial relief sinks to the pit of my belly and I hesitate. What am I supposed to tell the men—that their sister failed to follow through with killing me?

I've seen my fair share of villagers being dragged down to the dungeon to die of salt thirst for trying to hide their family members. Once the spirit in the mirror passes judgment against you, there is no escape. Grimhilde will go to any length to see her enemies brought to their knees.

I creep to the side of the house and run my fingers along the wood windowsill. The glazed glass windows are glowing with the warm light of the hearth fire. The fireplace is always going despite the heat. Doc, the oldest brother is melting metal in a pan and rotating his latest invention with a set of tongs. His forehead is sweating and his spectacles are slipping down his nose.

Antoni looks up from his book and sneezes when the fire crackles with smoke. The twins sit at the table, playing cards.

Thwack.

A dart flies past them and hits the bullseye on the wall. My chest squeezes at the sight of Jakob. He looks the most like Shiloh with his cropped golden hair and lean, muscular build. Another dart flies and hits the mark with excessive force. His eyebrows are drawn together when he takes a swig from his mug.

Fury. That's what they call him in the mines. He's known for his temper.

I sink into the overgrown rosemary so he won't see me.

Turning to them for help puts them all in grave danger. I've made tinctures for Antoni's allergies, and I've experimented with different teas to help balance Cas' bouts of melancholy. At my eighteenth birthday celebration, I smoothed my hands over the sculpted muscles of Doc's chest before I caught Shiloh making bashful eyes at me from the corner and decided I liked her better.

I've known Shiloh's family for years, but I'm not sure I'm worth the trouble to them. And even if I was, it wouldn't be fair to ask them to risk

their lives. Sighing, I crawl out of the garden. The tallest tower of the temple spears up through the tree line as if it's keeping a watchful eye on the island. A death sentence hangs over my head, and I have nowhere to go where Grimhilde can't find me.

After I wipe my tears away, I spot the old well at the edge of the garden. Wishes are for children, but I could use one right now. Or at least a sign of what to do next.

I tear off a piece of rosemary and move forward on my hands and knees until I can pull myself up to the lip of the well. The stones are worn and uneven, and the roof has collapsed, but a bucket still hangs from the rusted crank. I toss the rosemary in as an offering to any well-dwelling spirits and turn the handle slowly, inch by inch, praying it won't creak too loudly.

It fills, and I raise it up with the same care.

"Aha!" I exclaim under my breath when the bucket reappears. I grab the moldy wood greedily before the frayed rope can snap and set it on the ledge.

Years before the salt mines were built, people used to pull up the water from the ground and boil it until the salt crystallized. These lands have been fed by the ocean lapping at the shore for millennia, and I can feel the great power this water holds when I cup it in my palms and spill it back into the bucket.

It's perfect for scrying.

"I make a wish for a vision," I whisper and swirl my fingers through the milky liquid. "Show me the path I should take."

The clouds break up and reform along the bottom half of the bucket, making a half-circle that looks like... a beach. I frown and watch the patterns shift. Scrying can be tricky if you think too deeply about what you're seeing, so I try to keep an open mind, but the clouds are forming scenes that look similar to what I saw that day in Grimhilde's mirror.

There's a ship and a flash of a white gown on a beach. The water sloshes like a wave that wipes the vision clean, and then a hand materializes like it's reaching for mine before the night falls around me and the surface turns black.

My reflection stares back at me, wide-eyed as a full moon swells behind me. I check the sky and there isn't a sliver of moonlight. The trials are always held on a new moon.

“The best time to plant the seeds for who we’re to become,” Grimhilde preached. *Or to pluck them out before they can take root,* in my case.

“I don’t know what any of this means,” I say to the water, or the moon, or to any spirit willing to listen. “Is this what Grimhilde saw? Am I to become a terror in the night?”

Ripples form on the surface of the water, and the warm light from the cottage hits them, making them look like ocean waves lit aflame.

“Should I throw myself into the sea?” I hiss.

The bucket rattles as my emotions rise, and the warped oak slats burst apart. Water spills out and pools around me. I scootch back, trying to get away from the destruction I’ve caused.

This is why. This is what’s wrong with me.

“But I’ve tried my hardest to make myself perfect. For the Moon Coven. For the High Priestess. For my mother.”

My breath catches on the last word. I have a mother. Surely if I find her and explain to her what’s happened, she’ll help me make things right. I try to picture her face from the portraits I’ve seen in texts, but the word *mother* conjures images of Grimhilde’s auburn hair falling in her face, her hands guiding mine to mark runes in the sand and set the altar for a quarter moon ritual.

I shove the thought aside because I feel like my fondest memories have been carved from my chest. There’s a wide ocean between my mother and me, but I know I need to make the journey. I have to find my way back to her. I’m no threat to Lavinsar from there, so Grimhilde won’t need to worry.

“Who’s out here?”

The cottage door creaks open, and I hear Jakob’s low voice before his boots hit the porch. My hands tremble on the mouth of the well, but I push away from it when I see him turn his head toward the garden.

“Stop!” he calls. I know he’s faster than me, but I don’t obey. I cut away from the well, and head off the path where the forest will eventually give way to the shore.

“The moonless night conceals,” I pant out, willing my words to be true. New moons are a time to pour energy into long-term magic. It’s when we breathe intention into the impossible dreams we want to come true. I wrap the darkness around me like a cloak and fade into the night.

My heart pounds so loud in my ears that I can't tell if my wishing works, or if Jakob ever followed, but I can't hear his boots on the ground when my legs can no longer keep the pace. The woods have thinned out, and lantern light shines between the sparse tree line.

A fresh breeze sweeps across my damp skin, carrying the scent of oil and briny ocean water. Sand mixes in with the soil, and my heavy footsteps kick it up in sheets as I trudge forward. I'm close to the sea. I have no idea what to do when I get there, but it's where I'm meant to be.

Laughter twinkles over the sound of rushing waves. I thought the villagers would be in their beds by now, but this place is full of life. Touching a leafless tree, I peek out to see what the fuss is all about. I don't recognize any of the buildings here. They're all clapboard shacks and cabins, painted in hues of grey and blue. People sit on porch railings clutching bottles of amber liquid, and some dance in the sand with the ocean yawning wide behind them. This is much further than I've ever traveled before. Everything looks different than the rich reds and bold yellows of the marketplace I'm allowed to visit for Moon Coven errands.

I'm curious enough to want to see more, so I re-tie the cloak higher up on my neck and hope it covers the worst of the damage. This must be some sort of new moon festival. Luckily, everyone seems too preoccupied with their celebrations to notice me stepping out of the woods. Most of the buildings have their doors open, and violin music floats on the air. My eyes snag on the sight of a tall, blonde-haired woman in a low-cut red dress pulling another woman close to her. Slender fingers dig into the red satin as they kiss.

A shiver of excitement runs through me. Despite the danger I'm in, I feel like I've stumbled onto a new world. I'm still within Grimhilde's grasp, but she's far from my mind as I take in these new sights and scents.

A woman in a white gown similar to my own leads a man out from a place where feet are stomping in time with an upbeat tune. She giggles and leans on the porch railing before tossing her red hair back. He takes this as an offer and tosses his tricornered hat aside. His toothless grin disappears as he sinks his face into her tits.

I look down at my attire. It's silly to feel sad about its soiled state, but I dreamed of wearing it for so long. I close the cloak around it, brushing off the dirt. At least I won't look too out of place here. These villagers are

little rough around the edges. Perhaps I'll be able to join in on this party and meet a sailor who can take me across the sea.

I gather my courage and start looking for a friendly face to talk to. The woman on the porch spreads her thighs and the man pushes into her. They seem busy, so I walk to the next cabin, searching for my hero.

"Pardon me, madam."

A hand claps down on my shoulder, and I spin into a young gentleman. He has a ruddy face and light brown hair curling beneath his hat. His smile is kind enough, but anxiety spikes against my ribs when I see his naval officer's jacket. I need a sailor, not a member of Lavinsar's Navy.

Be calm. Act like you're part of the crowd, I tell myself.

"Hello, sir." I sweep my lashes low over my cheeks

"I couldn't help but notice you look a little lost," he says. "Can I help you?"

"Not lost at all," I say. Two women stroll by, whispering to each other behind the fans they hold beneath their eyes. I need to look as effortless as they do. "I was just searching for someone worth talking to. You look like you fit the bill."

He opens his mouth and shuts it just as fast. A wide grin replaces his look of confusion. "Walk with me, miss."

He offers his arm, and I take it. This might not be so hard. I can dance and joke with him, and then maybe I can spin into a sailor's reel. The heaviness in my heart lightens a little.

"I'm Lieutenant Jordan, but you can call me Jonathan," he introduces himself as we walk closer to waves crashing against the shore. "What's a lovely lady like you doing out here on a night like this?"

"Aren't there plenty of lovely ladies out here tonight?" I ask him, trying to play coy.

There's a crease between his eyebrows when he answers.

"Aye, but none quite as lovely as you."

He brings me to a large cabin nearby. It has an attached dock extending out into the water. A couple of small boats are tied to the wood posts, bobbing on the current. The door is closed here, but I can hear voices from the other side. His hand freezes on the latch.

"A fair warning—this establishment might be a little rough and tumble, but if you stay by my side, you'll be fine."

“Oh, I love rough and tumble,” I tell him. A round of shouting breaks out, and my interest grows. I’ve never heard such a clamor.

He bows his head and waves me into the building.

The smoke is thick in here, but beneath it, I can smell whiskey and fried fish. There are dozens of tables made of driftwood, and people are laughing, flirting, and sucking on cigars. Most of them are dressed in plain clothes, but the black and silver naval uniforms stand out amongst the sea of white linens and breeches.

“Should we dance?” I ask Jonathan. I’d like to get lost in the crowd before anyone looks too closely at me.

“Yes, sweetheart,” he says, but his attention is set ahead of him. “I need to speak with a friend first. I think he’ll want to meet you too. Wait here for me.”

I do as he says, trying not to notice how many eyes are drifting my way. I watch Jonathan cross to the back of the room where he taps a man on the back and whispers something in his ear. The man’s broad shoulders rise with a deep breath before falling. He does a double-take back at me and he sets his cards down. The silver tassels on his black velvet jacket sway when he sweeps the garment off the back of his chair.

He moves from the table, leaving a clear view of the woman sitting across from him. She’s dressed in one of those high-neck ruffled shirts that are all the fashion in the village right now, but her clothes don’t sit right on her. Her white skin has had too much sun, and her sharp oval face is harsh above the frilly layer. A plait of silver-streaked black hair hangs over her shoulder, although she doesn’t seem old enough to have gone so grey. A wide-shouldered companion sits to her right, their face covered by a spread of cards.

The woman’s stare holds. Her blue eyes are so vivid, I can see them through the dark fringe of her lashes from here. I smile weakly, trying to soften the intensity of her gaze, but her scowl only deepens. Maybe my appearance is offensive to her. I pull my cloak tighter around me.

“Madam, I’m Colonel Antoni,” a velvety voice breaks through my thoughts, and my connection with the woman is broken. I loosen a breath, feeling like I’ve been dropped from a chokehold when I glance at the officer. “I’m a friend of Jonathan’s. I hear you’re looking to dance. If you don’t mind, I’d like to take the first turn.”

I smooth my hand over my hair, and I'm startled when my fingers stop short at my chin. The events of the evening rush back to me; my head feels too light.

"That would be delightful," I say quickly to disguise my alarm.

A few dances. That's all. Then I can find my way out of here.

Colonel Antoni wraps an arm around me and brings his lips close to my ear as an upbeat reel begins to play.

"Does the High Priestess know one of her snow whites has run off?"

She doesn't notice my staring at first, but I'm fixated on her white gown—it's a great costume, even if it's a little worn. Looks authentic. Like she could be a real priestess if the Moon Coven allowed their devotees to wander about at night. She has the whole shy façade down pat; she looks around the place like a lost fawn, her brown eyes wide and searching.

Someone is going to be emptying their pockets tonight. It won't be me, though. I know better than to get caught up with that.

The woman is all soft curves and swells, her beige skin sun-kissed and bright against her pale gown. She's the human embodiment of one of those pastries they keep in the window case of Corstyliia's best bakery, warm and golden beneath a fine layer of powdered sugar. The kind of sweet that spoils your taste for anything else, so it's best to never take a bite.

"After corresponding for so long, I must admit that you're nothing like what I expected, my lady." I tear my eyes away from the woman and remember I'm supposed to be losing a card game to the man across from me.

"You're not who I pictured either," I respond honestly. Trading humans as cargo is a hideous thing, but his ugly soul hides behind nice manners and military ribbons. He doesn't look or act like a monster.

I have a great hand, but I'm posing as a novice player, so I feign confusion when I choose a card. I scratch at the prickling itch beneath my stiff collar. The late Countess of Nordersham was apparently a fan of ruffles. It's all we could find when we rummaged through her chests. Lilah

would have been better suited to pull off the role, but all of the gowns on *The Prancing Waters* were too long for anyone but me.

Fucking underworld. Why did it have to be ruffles? The late-autumn heat in this part of the world is miserable enough as it is, and the fabric rubs against the fresh row of scales lining my left collarbone. I hate being here. It's brimming with zealots and too damn hot for me to ever feel comfortable.

Be witty and engaging, I scold myself. *Not completely feral*. Countesses don't sneer and scratch like dogs, even when they're asking polite naval officers to indulge them in a night of gentle debauchery.

"I wonder if any of the other girls will surprise me as much as you have. Shame they'll all end up at the Moon Coven temple. It'd be nice to keep one for myself every now and then."

I snap my head up, unable to keep the scowl from my face.

Skye's thigh presses against mine in a firm warning. We've worked too hard on this ruse to let it go now. Besides, the girls the countess lured to her ship with a promise of paid work have been transferred to a sloop in my fleet. They'll be taken back home to their families, unharmed. But Antoni can't find out that his deal has fallen through until I have his payment in hand and a gun to his head.

"Yes, I'm sure you'll be surprised," I state.

I don't have to look at my companion to know they're glaring daggers at me. They're my first mate and the closest thing I've got to a friend. Fortunately, they're much cooler-headed than I am.

I muster up a smile.

"Nice try, my lady," the colonel says, placing a set of spades down. "You'll get the hang of it if you keep practicing."

I grumble my retort too low for him to hear, and Skye steps on my foot. I perk up and run my finger over the rim of my wineglass like I've seen so many beautiful women do when they're playing seductive games with me. I find the gesture to be hypnotizing.

"How lucky we are to have you as a teacher. You've been so generous; if we'd known Lavinsar would be so welcoming, we wouldn't have been so worried about getting stranded here. Your people are so warm, and Corstyliia is such a cold place." I swear I hear Skye coughing to hide a laugh, but I continue. "We can't wait to get the private tour of your cabin."

He makes a noise deep in his throat when he swallows his whiskey and flicks his tongue over his lips.

“I’d very much love to show you two around, but it will have to be a clandestine affair. We’re really not supposed to invite civilians aboard, but I can make an exception for folks as fine as you,” he says with a wink.

Success. The colonel is objectively handsome, but I have no interest in his cleft chin or his thick salt-and-pepper hair. I only want to slip into his cabins for one thing—a hefty payment.

Besides, his eyes have been on Skye all night, running over their parted top and the sleek muscles beneath. Skye brushes a strand of flaxen hair behind their ear as if they sense his heated gaze.

“Shall we finish this round or get a move on?”

Colonel Antoni takes another sip, his eyes closing when he shudders out a breath like he’s already thinking about what he wants to do when he gets us aboard. “We should—”

A lower-ranking officer taps his shoulder, cutting off his proposition. Colonel Antoni looks ready to tell his subordinate off, but the young man whispers, “Do you see that woman over there? I’m pretty sure that’s a ceremonial gown she’s wearing.”

“Lots of women wear those around here. The sailors like the novelty when they’re in Lavinsar.”

“Sir, her attire looks official, and she’s behaving strangely. Has the temple reported a missing priestess?” He presses his knuckles to his mouth and lowers his voice. “I had duty at the temple a few years ago. She looks a lot like the brat from Gentrilly.”

“Fuck’s sake.” Colonel Antoni groans and does a double-take over his shoulder before turning his polite smile back to us. “If you’ll pardon me, it seems a woman here needs some assistance.” He lies because he can. It doesn’t matter that we just heard the same information he did. Gentlefolk don’t ask prying questions in polite company. “I’ll be right back to finish our business.”

When he stands, my eyes lock with the woman, and I spot the blood blossoming through the white collar of her cloak. I don’t know what kind of trouble she’s running from, but she stands stock still as if she doesn’t realize these men will push her right back to it.

Run, girl, I think. It’s like watching a doe waiting for an arrow to strike. They’re on to you, you little fool.

“Did you catch any of that?” I ask Skye when the men spin her out to the dance floor.

“Yes. It sounds like Moon Coven politics. We should stay out of it and focus on getting what we need from Antoni.”

“Ah, but political matters can be quite lucrative.” I spread my cards on the table, considering my options. “It could mean big money to help pay our big debts.”

“It might mean no money at all when we could at least get some.”

“True,” I concede. “That’s why you’re here to keep me in line.”

I search the crowd for the white gown and the petite woman wearing it. I only want to see if looking at her will set alarm bells ringing in my head again, but I can’t find her.

“She’s gone,” Skye states.

“Something’s amiss.”

“Aye,” they agree.

“Think we should find out what it is?”

“Probably not.”

I drum my fingers on the sticky table. The oil lamp lighting is dim. It was hard to see the woman’s distinct features. Still, the heart shape of her face, the soft arch of her eyebrows, and the bow of her lips all seem familiar.

I know I’ve seen that face before—in port pamphlets and newspapers. The would-be heir of the Gentrillian throne. The wished-for child that Queen Isobel had to surrender as part of the peace agreement. *An heir for an heir*, and the prince of Lavinsar had been slain in the battle of Farseley.

“Do you think she looked a bit like—”

“Mhmm,” Skye answers, rolling their lips in like they’ve been waiting for me to come to the same conclusion. “All the more reason to mind our own business. Wouldn’t want to take the wrong side and get caught in the middle of that.”

Gwendolyn. Her name rolls around softly in my head. The last I heard of her was in some announcement about her being chosen to train as a priestess of the Moon Coven.

The Gentrillian territories hail it as a miracle that their lost princess is precious enough to win the heart of their former enemy. Down here in Lavinsar, they treat her rise as a humble symbol of peace. Her portrait hangs in shop windows all around the world, showing a bland, sweet smile

fixed on a pretty face, but I wouldn't have made the connection if I hadn't heard the young officer make a reference to Gentrilly.

The paintings don't portray the soft curve of her shoulders or the exact point of her chin. They certainly don't capture the desperate look in her eyes, the poorly chopped hair, or the gash on her neck. Symbol of peace, my ass.

Looking around, no one else seems to realize who she is. This place would get rowdy fast if anyone found out they were in the presence of a royal. Even a *would-be* royal.

I knock my drink back before gulping down the rest of the colonel's.

"Checking on her would be a neutral course of action. We wouldn't want to anger the queen *or* the High Priestess by letting the precious snow white get hurt by a couple of boneheads."

Skye's grey eyes roll back. "How nice of you to be concerned about the welfare of the world, Morgen. I'm sure this has nothing to do with money or rewards," they say, but they're reaching in their boot for the dagger hidden there, so I know they're on the same page.

"What can I say? I'm a regular dove of peace."



THE OFFICERS ARE ALREADY DOWN by the docks by the time we find them. The woman is mostly obscured by Colonel Antoni's hulking figure. Relief flutters through my stomach when the wind whips her white skirt past his leg. They haven't shoved her in the water and drowned our chance at a sweet ransom.

"Gents," I call out to them. The colonel's shoulders snap back, and the would-be princess' hand falls by her side as if he's been holding it with some force. The look on the younger man's face confirms what I suspect. He watches his superior with a look of polite horror. What an unpleasant problem—to hate seeing a woman being mistreated but too low-ranking and scared to do anything about it.

"Countess," the colonel calls back. He brings the woman around and slings an arm over her sloped soldiers like they're the best of pals. "I was just about to have Lieutenant Jordan escort this one back to the Moon

Coven temple. It seems there was some miscommunication, but she'll be all right." He squeezes her arms, and she grimaces.

I do too. I want to cut his fingers off for it.

"I told you I'm not a priestess," the woman lies. "I'm not from around here. I only need a way back home."

"Where's home?" I ask her.

"Across the sea," she says, not specifying. "If I can get to the northern continent...I have family who would repay my expenses..."

"What a coincidence. I'm heading north in a few days. You can stay with me until then, and I'd be happy to offer you a safe passage." I have her right where I want her. Already offering up money to get out of this mess.

"I'm afraid that's not possible. It's customary to double-check with the High Priestess—"

"Why are you bleeding?" I ask her, not letting Antoni finish his customary bullshit.

"She went off into the woods," the colonel explains, speaking slowly like I won't understand. "The snow whites are fragile creatures, you see. They're not supposed to travel alone for good reason, and now she's gone and gotten herself hurt. Poor thing. I'll see to it that she's safe since you're so concerned."

"I don't recall asking you," I reply and Skye goes rigid beside me. Their hand is fiddling in their pocket, likely fingering the handle of their dagger. I breathe deep into my belly like Cook taught me and try to remember my manners. "I believe you," I tell the woman. "I'm more than happy to take you aboard when we set sail." I flick my smile back to Colonel Antoni. "I won't mind at all."

"Madam, I'm sorry, but it's not allowed. If the High Priestess approves, I'm sure she could hop on one of our ships. Anyways, your boat is a bit stuffy. I'm sure she won't want to travel in such cramped quarters."

"*Fuck it,*" I mutter beneath my breath for Skye's ears only. "I'm going for it."

I slip the knife from my sleeve in a smooth motion and have it pressed to his throat in the speed of two heartbeats. Ruffles are good for hiding things. Noted.

"That's not what your mother said about my boat." His nostrils flare, but I dig in. "It might have been a tight fit for your father, but he insisted

on watching.”

The colonel’s mouth screws up tight, and he’s about to spew something not fit for a lady’s ears, but I swipe my blade across his skin. The words gurgle in his throat as he bleeds out. Metal clashes against metal. The young Lieutenant is finally drawing his sword, and Skye only has their dagger.

“Come with me.” I extend my hand to the snow white, but she’s too busy trembling and staring at the lifeless body to take it. I wrap my fingers tight around hers. “More of them will be coming. We need to leave.”

“Together?”

What an odd question. “Did you miss the part where I killed that man? Of course we’re going together.”

Her whole body shakes, but she starts to move with me. She’s slow. Probably hurt, but I don’t know the extent of her injuries. We need to get out of here before more officers come along.

A metallic clang rings through the night, and there’s a deep huff of breath. Skye has knocked the lieutenant’s sword from his hand and is now wielding it near the young man’s torso.

“Stay back,” they command and jog backward for a few paces to catch up with us.

More people exit the tavern. We need to haul ass, but the precious snow white keeps stumbling.

“Can you speed up a little bit?” I grunt and wrap an arm around her, but even with my support, she’s slowing us down.

“I’m trying my best,” she pants. I glance back at Skye.

Help.

Their jaw tightens, but they lift Gwendolyn over their shoulder like a sack of flour. She yelps but quiets down at the sight of a man standing over the recently deceased Colonel Antoni.

The dock creaks below us. I cut the ropes to the nearest rowboat once Skye puts Gwen down on the bench and kicks us away from the shore.

The young Lieutenant Jordan makes it to the dock and lunges forward as we start to drift out of reach. He scrambles and reaches but can’t get a grasp. Skye reaches for the flintlock pistol tucked into their waistband and takes aim.

Gwendolyn flinches at the loud bang.

“Fuck. I missed.” Skye shakes out their wrist.

I lift my skirt and remove the pistol strapped to my thigh, straightening my arm over Gwendolyn's shoulder to mark my target.

I don't miss.

Blood pools on the dock.

"Oh my." She grips the gunnels. "Was that necessary?"

"He would have run straight to your High Priestess to tell her that one of her precious snow whites was found in a tavern near the port. Tell me, what would have happened then?"

Her nose twitches. *Gods*. She looks like a rabbit trying to stand its ground.

"I'm not a snow white," she mumbles and hangs her head.

"That's the right idea. Snowdrop is a common name for a noblewoman. When you're aboard, you'll only respond to that name. Got it, Snow?"

She frowns but nods.

"I'm Morgen, and their name is Skye. We won't take you back to your temple, but you can't let anyone else know who you really are."

A cold gust of wind stirs up on the back end of a wave. I slip off my coat and hand it to her. I need the chill to wake me up and chase away any thoughts of how she looks with her nipples peaked beneath her thin gown.

"But won't you be cold?"

"I'm used to it," I answer. Better to be cold and on edge than to let myself get too comfortable. She wraps the jacket around herself and pulls her arms in. Good. It'll cover the top half of that ridiculous gown, and I won't be distracted by her bloody shivering any longer.

Skye and I row in silence, and Snow keeps her back turned to us, watching the docks disappear. When *The Prancing Waters* is in sight, the faint outline of its moniker glittering beneath the lamplight, I unbutton my skirt and step out into my breeches.

"Put this on." I'm fumbling for the grappling hook with one hand, and she does nothing to free the other.

"It's too long," she says when I lift my eyebrows.

"You can't show up in that gown. The crew will be outraged if they figure out who you are."

Her legs shake as she rises from the bench. She's clearly never left dry land before. She steps into the brown skirt, and I notice the blisters and raw skin on her feet. Why in the underworld is she not wearing shoes? No wonder she's moving so slowly.

She sucks in a breath when the skirt catches on her hips, but she slides the waistband up until it hits the notch where her waist curves in.

The fabric rolls down past her bare feet, covering any evidence of the white tulle. A wave rocks the boat, sending her tumbling into me. I catch her by the elbows and help her to stand.

“The ocean is as beautiful as the stories say,” she says, looking past me.

A smile plays on her lips. Her mood has shifted so quickly after seeing the two men killed that I’m starting to think the rumors about the Moon Coven and its temple of bones are true. This woman is no stranger to death. I study the curve of her face. You can tell a lot about a person by their reaction to violence.

The breeze stirs up the salty scent of her skin. There’s sweat and ocean spray, yes, but something clean lingers beneath it. Purified salt and rose oil, I think. I want to lean in to make sure, but I would never risk getting too close to someone who smells like flowers and stares wide-eyed at the vastness of the sea.

My heartbeat stutters for a second because now she’s looking at *me* like I’m decent. Of all the naive mistakes she’s made tonight, that’s the worst one.

I am damned to be terrible, and I’m thinking of sniffing her neck for the love of the gods. There are less than two months until I’m free of this curse. A small slice of time left to master my feelings. It’s best to avoid any temptation with someone so lovely before the hourglass runs out.

Though I do wonder if I will miss the scent of roses or the sight of pretty women when I’m called down to the depths of the sea.

I shake the thought away and step back from her before she can do something foolish like thank me.

“Lilah is tossing the rope ladder down now,” Skye says. “Ready to climb?”

“Oh, I—” Snow touches my shoulder. “What if the sailors won’t let me on, even with all this?” She gestures over the coat and skirt.

“They don’t have much say in that,” I laugh and guide her until she has a good grip on the ropes. “After all, I am the captain.”

“What are you doing back already?” A sing-song voice rises over the waves. “Please tell me you two didn’t screw this up.”

Skye climbs the ladder much faster than I can. Their figure disappears over the side while I’m only a few rungs up. I have to keep kicking this long skirt out of the way to ensure I’m secure before moving any higher. A slight buzz of exhilaration keeps me going.

I know it’s wrong.

I shouldn’t feel excited after what happened to those men, but Skye and Morgen showed up just as the colonel was attempting to shake the truth from my brain. Seeing a knife pressed to his throat felt like a miracle.

My magic has steered me in the right direction. Straight into the arms of a countess who captains her own ship and is willing to take me somewhere safe.

The boat rocks as I’m getting my leg over the side, and I make my grand entrance by hitting my ass on the deck.

Skye grins at my floundering attempt to stand and crooks two fingers. A beautiful woman dressed in a pink gown appears at their side and waits for me to get to my feet.

“This is why we’re early. Lilah, meet Snow,” Skye says before I can mess up and forget my new identity.

“Who in the underworld is Snow?”

“A noble who needs a ride home,” Morgen says, clearing the deck. “She was swept up in some nasty business with Colonel Antoni. I’m sure

her family will appreciate having her back in one piece.”

“You botched the plan for a pretty face. Why am I not surprised?” Lilah rubs the space between her eyebrows. Silver rings shine on her fingers, complementing the cool undertones of her deep brown skin.

“Not just a pretty face,” Morgen says, standing behind me and patting my cheek. The knife-wielding countess thinks I’m pretty. My heart swoops in my chest, then immediately plummets. “A pretty bag of gold.”

“Gold?” My voice cracks. The talk of money is dulling the shine of being rescued.

“Yes, you did tell the gents back there that your family would pay your expenses once you arrived in Gentrilly.” Morgen steps around me, twirling her knife. “And your family is very wealthy, right?”

I nod cautiously at her question, startled by the sudden cold shift in her voice. I never mentioned Gentrilly specifically. I don’t know how to play this game. I don’t know how much to keep hidden or what truths I can trust this woman with. I can’t even tell how much she already knows.

“Then it’s settled.”

“It’s not,” Lilah counters. “We need supplies, and we’re low on funds. Gentrilly is too fucking far.”

“I can assure you that Snow’s family is the type of wealthy that will make blowing the rest of our funds worth it.”

How can she be so sure? I touch my face, trying not to let them see my hands shake. Am I so recognizable outside the temple walls without my official garments and waist-length hair?

Skye grunts in agreement.

“There’s still the matter of how dangerous the sea is this time of year. Our travel days and stops would need to be timed perfectly. Everything would need to be precise.”

“Precision happens to be my navigator’s middle name,” Morgen says.

“Flattery doesn’t work on me, but we’ll let the crew vote.” Lilah directs her next question to me. “And why is Colonel Antoni letting you leave the island if you’re worth so much?”

“Because he’s dead,” Skye answers for me.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Afraid not, so there’s no returning to plan A at this point,” Morgen says.

Lilah unties a rope from a metal loop. “Hurry up, then. We need to catch the ship before someone starts after us.”

A handful of people climb out of a hatch, and boots trample the deck. Men and women dressed in untucked, wrinkled shirts and grimy trousers pass by. The air is streaked with the onion-sharp scent of unwashed bodies as they tug on ropes and stack piles of boxes.

“Shame to leave this one behind,” Skye says. “She would’ve been a nice addition to the fleet.”

Morgen doesn’t look up from the pistols she’s repositioning on the strap beneath her shirt. I try not notice the shadow of muscle on her abdomen or the shimmer of a green line snaking down below her belt. I’ve never seen a tattoo on a noblewoman before. “It’ll be worth it. Got a few new crew mates from ‘er too. I don’t take any joy in sinking such a work of art, though.”

Her fingers run over the ivy carved into the baluster near the steps.

“Why would you sink your ship?” I ask.

She blinks at the question. “This isn’t my ship. It belonged to the Countess of Nordersham.”

“But aren’t you the countess?”

She exchanges a look with Skye.

“Oh, Snow. No. We *stole* this from the countess. That’s what we do. We steal, and we go on our merry way to make money and spend it how we please. But I bet you’ll make us a better profit than any old passenger ship could.”

My face burns under her assessment. Now I know she’s not looking at me because she’s worried about my safety. Or because she thinks I have a pretty face. I’m nothing but a bag of gold to her. I hate that I’m full of silly ideas about anyone who might see me as more than an object to be traded.

That’s all I’ve ever been to anyone.

“You’re a pirate,” I say plainly.

“Now you’re catching on, love. Can’t say the late countess was much better, though. She’s not worth your tears.”

Morgen tosses me a wink as she hustles to direct the crew. I huddle in her coat, feeling helpless as I watch people—*pirates*—hurry past. I lean against the wall, trying to make myself invisible to them.

The night is dark enough without a moon, but a shadow passes by, blotting out any external light. I shrink beneath the awning with a new sense of terror washing over me as another, much larger ship takes shape. Cream flags ripple on three tall masts, and lanterns glow high on the top deck, illuminating the lettering painted on the side.

The Ruined Soul.

Such criminals face harsh punishments if they're caught plundering too close to the kingdom's borders. Lavinsar doesn't tolerate pirates or their penchant for violence.

I've been misled again, straight into another dangerous situation.

But I can smell the salt air and feel the waves beneath me. I might have followed the signs to the wrong place, but I must be close to getting it right.

Tentatively, I step toward the railing to look out into the ocean. Blood wooshes in my ears, louder than the crash of the waves or voices shouting. If I can get close to the mist, I'll be able to clear my head properly. I always think better near the water; it calls to me.

I'm wrenched back suddenly.

"What are you doing?" Morgen hisses. Her arm is like steel around my waist when I'm thrown back against her body. "Were you seriously about to jump into the fucking ocean?"

"I'm a good swimmer." It's hard to speak when she has me in such a tight hold.

She turns me around to face her. Lamplight dances over her features, and I can see the rough texture of her skin—the tiny pit marks where she must have had blemishes in her adolescence, and the sunburn on the bridge of her nose. I don't know how I mistook her for a noble. Highborns spend more time at the temple seeking out beauty solutions than any other treatment.

"You're mad," she says. "You'd be fish food in a matter of minutes with this current."

"I've read about pirate *shit*." I practically spit the word out. Foul language never feels right in my mouth. "Fish food would be a far kinder fate."

Morgen's mouth twitches. "Pirate shit?"

"I'd rather not get tortured and ravished by a bunch of filthy thieves with no morals," I clarify.

The brief flicker of amusement I saw is gone. Her blue eyes narrow.

"I may not share your moral code, but I don't allow torture for fun on my ship, and rape is punishable by keelhauling." Noticing my arm is still in her grip, she slides her hand down to my wrist and pulls me along. "You're staying with me until we get this sorted."

People are hauling trunks and crates over the planks that stretch between the boats, and others are beginning to swing from ropes to cross. Morgen's thumb brushes over my racing pulse point, and she follows my gaze to the pirates clearing their landings.

"The good swimmer is scared?"

I don't want to tell her that it's not the ocean that scares me, but the fall. I could never let myself get too close to the window of Grimhilde's scrying room. Heights always make me dizzy, and I don't think I have the strength to swing that far.

One time I tried to hang from a branch and pull my body up the way I'd seen Shiloh do it, but I could barely lift myself a few inches from the ground. She eventually grabbed onto my legs to help me clear the branch with my chin. The memory of her laughter makes my blood run cold.

"It's all right," Morgen says in a gentler voice. "I'll cross behind you on the planks, and we'll take the rope ladder slowly."

"Thank you," I whisper, but she looks away and pats the wooden plank.

"No need for any of that. I'm only protecting my prize."



THE CLIMB IS PAINSTAKINGLY slow with the wind whipping my hair across my face. Occasional murmurs from Morgen keep me going. I can't tell if her words are encouraging, or if she's annoyed by my pace, but I can practically feel her relief when I finally make it onto the deck.

"This is my pride and joy: *The Ruined Soul*," she says, her boots hitting the boards right after me. There's already a crowd gathered, and the wares from *The Prancing Waters* are being carried away.

Lilah walks beside a bulky-muscled white man with hair sticking out of his ears and eyebrows so bushy they nearly cover the way he's glaring at me.

“Morgen,” he says gruffly. “Lilah filled me in on this plan of yours. This is uncalled for. Unprecedented. We took a vote to stay near one of the smaller isles until you could make use of the countess’ connections and get us a bigger bounty. This is a rogue decision.”

“You served my father loyally, Harri. I’m quite lucky to have you as my quartermaster,” Morgen says, sauntering up to him. Harri stands a few inches taller than her, but he slouches in her presence. His muscles seem to shrink beneath his deeply-wrinkled skin. “But with all due respect, I am your captain, and I will bend plans to suit my crew as needed.”

She pulls me along the deck, not giving him a chance to argue.

“Stay in here,” she says, opening the door to a small room. “I need the crew to take a vote on you, but you’ll be safe here ‘til then. Do not leave, and do not open up for anyone but me.”

She turns on her heel and leaves me in the dark. The window doesn’t let in enough light for me to see my surroundings.

I drop to my hands and knees and feel around the room, trying to find the small cot suspended by ropes I saw before she closed the door. There’s an unlit oil lamp on the desk in the corner, but I don’t want to risk breaking the glass in here. I pull myself up and try to will my stomach to settle, but it’s moving along with the motion of the boat.

I’m too queasy and unnerved to rest, but I’m also too drained to think about what my next step should be.

I lie on the cot—which at least smells clean—and let the images of the evening play out in my mind. I’m too numb for any of it to make me feel much, but I keep coming back to Shiloh in her guard’s uniform and the feel of cool metal beneath my palm. I only want to remember that brief period of time when I felt like my dreams were on the verge of coming true and hold on to it for a little while longer.

A blast startles me from the fantasy before I can pretend this is all a nightmare. I scream and cover my ears as I jolt upright. The door swings open, and footsteps cut through the ringing sound. A flame curls up in the glass vase across from me, illuminating Morgen’s slim figure leaning over the desk. She’s changed her top and is wearing a flowy, lantern-sleeved blouse that’s tucked into the high waistband of her breeches. Strips of bandages cross over her chest where the shirt opens. She pulls out the chair next to it and drags it beside the bed, crossing her legs when she takes a seat.

“The crew has voted. Congratulations, they believed your story. You’re set to sail with us.”

“What if the crew had voted against your plan?”

She shrugs.

“Guess we would’ve tossed you overboard. But they’re a smart lot. They know I won’t lead them astray.” She uncrosses her legs and leans forward, bracing her hands on her knees. “Keep up the ruse until we get you back home, safe with Mama. In exchange, you’ll make a case for us to receive a handsome reward, and for the crew to be pardoned.”

“Pardoned from what?”

Morgen ignores the question and pulls a bottle from her leather satchel. Uncorking it with her teeth, she presses the glass mouth to a rag.

“Give me your legs,” she says, spitting the cork out.

“What?” I tuck my legs further into my skirts.

“I don’t have time for this. Put your legs over the side so I can tend to your feet.”

I swing them over the side of the cot, and she takes my heel firmly in her hand and rests my ankle on her lap. To my surprise, she swipes over the cuts slowly, picking out the fragments of thorns before washing the dirt away.

She passes over a blister that stings so much I suck in a breath, and she pauses to hold pressure on the spot.

“It’ll stop burning in a second. This always helps.”

“Thank you.” The words slip out when the pain finally eases.

“Can’t send you back to your family with your legs rotted from infection if I want to fetch full price for you,” she says without looking up. “And I can’t send you to Cook for treatment. I don’t need you babbling to him about how you got these blisters.”

I bite my tongue, vowing to think before I say another silly thing. The shame of being so naive feels worse than the pain throbbing up to my calves.

“I thought the Moon Coven was protective of their precious snow whites,” she says, dabbing a tender area. “What the devil did you do to make them chase you into the night?”

“I’m not a snow white,” I tell her, and she stops moving. Her eyes bore into mine.

“Your circumstances are a secret we keep from the rest of them, but you don’t lie to me. You are on this ship because of who you are, and I won’t allow you to play me like a fool when it comes time for my payment. Is that understood?”

I nod, swallowing back tears.

“Now, tell me what happened. I want to know who might be coming after us.”

“I broke the rules,” I whimper. I hate how it sounds, but she’s already figured out who I am, and I’m terrified. She’s a pirate, not a hero. She’ll toss me off this ship if she decides the risk isn’t worth the reward.

“What rules?” She frowns and grabs my heel. “Never mind. I don’t care what you did. What was your punishment?”

“Death,” I whisper. A dark look slips over her face, but she doesn’t say anything. I touch my neck. “Grimhilde sent a guard to kill me before my commitment ceremony began. She couldn’t go through with it. I ran. That’s all.” I don’t mention Shiloh’s name or how she was so much more than a guard to me. “So you see, I’m not a snow white. I’m technically still a servant blue.”

“What’s the difference?” She hands me a clean rag for my neck. “Only the fae are born with supernatural abilities, and the witches claim power for themselves by other means. The rest of you are drawing symbols in the dirt or playing with bones and calling it magic.”

“They’re sacred rituals,” I correct her and kick my legs away as soon as she finishes wrapping the linen. I think I catch the smallest flash of a smile at my act of defiance. She’s probably waiting to mock me, but I continue with my chin lifted, “One must be fully committed to the Coven to harness the full power of the moon.”

I curl my fingers behind my back, feeling my power raise its head. I don’t tell her that my magic scares me even though I can’t find a drop of fae blood in my family tree. I don’t mention the man in the mirror or what he told Grimhilde.

“What element do you work with?” she asks and leans back.

“Water.”

“Interesting.” She slaps her thighs as she stands. “Plenty of water around here. Feel free to work your charms. We’ll need all the help we can get on this voyage.” She starts for the door, and panic rises in my chest again.

“Where are you going?”

“To my cabin.”

“You’re not staying?”

She pauses at the doorknob, mid-turn. “Why would I be staying?”

“I don’t know.” I’ve never spent a night alone, and the idea is disconcerting. Our bunks are close together in the Moon Coven dormitories. Only official snow whites get their own rooms.

I decide to keep that information to myself. I already feel pathetic enough.

“Skye is my first mate, and they’ve been lovely enough to allow you to use their private cabin for the journey. Keep to yourself and lock up behind me; you’ll be fine.” Her hand lingers on the frame as the deck’s light haloes around her. There’s a blue tint to the grey streaks in her hair that I didn’t notice before. “My room is right next to yours. I’ll be able to hear you if anything happens.”

When she leaves, I curl up on the cot, breathing slowly to quell the nausea rolling over me. I can do this. I can make myself small and unnoticeable until we get to Gentrilly. Every time I close my eyes, I try to envision my mother and her palace, but all I can see is Grimhilde with her lace hood drawn over her eyes, smiling from her tower made of bones.

The first few days I feel adrift, my stomach roiling with every wave. I'm unsteady, untethered from the shore, and far away from my temple. My home. I roll the same memories around in my mind until my head feels numb. The cycle starts up fresh and raw each time I heave into the bucket in the corner.

I spill my breakfast and wipe my mouth, waiting to make sure the nausea has passed before I move back to bed.

Today is better. When I shut my eyes, the world is still moving, but I don't want to lie down immediately. I might even try to read one of the books below the desk to stop my mind from wandering.

I stand slowly, noticing the pile of clothes folded near the lamp. There's a note on top.

Fold your underthings beneath my jacket. I'll get them later. These should be more comfortable for the trip. -M

"What pretty handwriting for such a dastardly pirate," I mutter, looking at the slants of her letters before folding the parchment. There's a pair of blue breeches, a plain white blouse, and best of all: a pair of thick socks rolled inside two brown leather boots.

My white gown clings to my back, sticky with sweat, and I'm happy to peel it off and be rid of the sour smell. I dip a cloth into the water pitcher next to my empty breakfast plate and run it over my damp skin before dressing. Like the skirt, the breeches are snug, but I don't care for how they hug around my hips and thighs. I'm grumbling and tucking the blouse into the waistband when I hear a knock at the door.

It cracks open a bit, and a man peeks his nearly-bald head in. The first few times he came around with tea, I shrank in the corner. He kept his distance and spoke softly about the food he brought with him without expecting any response or gratitude. It was his kindness that coaxed me from my shell and made me curious enough to talk to him. Now I find myself looking forward to seeing his doughy, friendly face three times a day. He's my only visitor.

"My lady," he says, and I have to stop myself from brushing off the formality.

"Come in, Jacques." I throw Morgen's jacket over my snow whites. I expected it to be her at the door, coming to claim the garments. Silly. The captain isn't going to bother with me in the middle of the day. She'll probably slip in when her work is done and I'm asleep. The tray Jacques is holding is a welcome sight. I focus on that instead. "I'm ready for tea."

"I sliced some fresh ginger like you asked." He pours hot water into a delicate porcelain cup and hands it to me. "This should help too."

I breathe in deeply. The scent of peppermint rises on the steam. "This is divine. Thank you."

"How are you liking the sea life so far?"

I stick my tongue out.

"Glad to see you looking less green around the gills anyways," Jacques chuckles as I pop a chunk of ginger into my mouth. "Captain sent me to look after you, so let me know if there's anything you need."

"That won't be necessary," I insist. No one has ever waited on me. "The food is enough."

"But it's my honor." He puts his hand over his chest. "I used to serve in Lord Hamershell's household. I wonder if you remember his family?"

I shake my head, not wanting to start a conversation about Gentrillian nobles. There are too many holes in my fabricated backstory.

"No, well, you're quite young. I suppose you were just a babe when the war ended. None of them made it out alive." He pulls a tight smile and stands. "I'll be back with supper."

"Wait," I call, watching him move to the door. I can't be left in here alone for days on end with no release for my magic or distraction from the thoughts that keep pulling me under. "I'd like to stretch my legs. Maybe catch a breath of fresh air. Do you think that's possible?"

“I wasn’t given a specific order not to,” he mumbles. His knuckles tighten around the empty tray before he relaxes. “I don’t see why not. I have a half-hour before I’m needed in the kitchen.”

I squint against the flood of sunlight when he brings me out onto the deck. A gust of salt air steals my breath and pokes at the magic in my blood, waking it up. The crew is busy; there are dozens of people rolling barrels and carrying bundles of ropes over their shoulders.

No one pays much attention to me. I blend in with my plain clothes here just as I did in the temple with my servant blues.

“It’s huge,” I exclaim.

“Yes,” Jacques agrees. “Captain’s other ships are mostly made for speed; she keeps a lot of sloops under her control, but this is the jewel of the fleet.”

I nod as if I know what a sloop is and listen to him go on about the technical aspects of boats. It doesn’t matter what he talks about; it’s nice to have some human contact.

“Any questions?” he asks once we’ve rounded the first deck.

“Yes.” There was one phrase Morgen used that I’ve turned over a thousand times, trying to figure out its meaning. “What’s keelhauling?”

“When someone gets tossed over the bow and tied up on the hull of the ship. They get dragged beneath,” he says, his tone still chipper. I think I might be ill again. “You’re not worried about that are you?” His forehead creases up and he lowers his voice. “I won’t tell you the captain is kind, but I can honestly say that she’s fair. She doesn’t go around punishing people for fun.”

“Not worried at all,” I say, but I can’t shake the mental image of being scraped along the bottom of the sea.

“No need to be. Listen to the captain and her first mate, but come see me if you need help. You’ll be fine. That’s Griff up there.” Jacques points to the man in the crow’s nest above us.

“Yo-ho,” Griff calls, his golden hair falling over his sunburnt face as he leans over the side of the barrel. I manage a small wave.

“And there’s Sampson,” Jacques says. He gestures to another man sitting at the bottom of the main mast, reading from an astronomy book. His long black hair is pulled into a low ponytail that rests on his russet brown shoulders. He nods politely at me.

“You can trust both of them but don’t ever mess with one in front of the other. Those lovebirds are quite protective of each other. Out of all the ships I’ve worked on since the war, this one feels the most like home. We’re almost like a family around here.”

“How nice,” I say, surprising myself. It *does* seem nice. There’s significantly less sword-fighting and plundering than I thought there would be. Things are actually kind of quiet when there’s a lull in the day’s work.

Jacques checks the angle of the sun in the sky. “I’d better get you back to your room now.”

Jacques is so warm and kind it’s hard to think of him as a pirate. But there’s a shiny pink scar on his forearm in the shape of the letter T, the mark of a thief.

“Jacques, what is taking so bloody long—” Harri rounds the corner, stopping abruptly when he sees me standing next to the kitchen hand. The quartermaster takes a long look at me and frowns. “What is she doing out of her room?”

“The lady requested some fresh air,” Jacques answers. “I see nothing wrong with it.”

“I don’t like it,” Harri grumbles. “Maybe you want to butter her up because she’s a noblewoman, but she doesn’t need to know the ins and outs of our affairs.”

Jacques’ ears turn pink.

“That wasn’t why I—”

“Lead her back to her cabin, and don’t do this again.” Harri’s grey mustache moves as he spits his words. “We’ll deliver her safely, per the captain’s orders, but she’s not entitled to anything else. You’ll work an extra shift in the kitchen tonight. Rhys will run the food instead.”

“He only took me out for a walk because I requested it,” I say. Jacques has only shown me kindness. I don’t want him to be punished on my behalf. I also don’t want to lose the only person willing to speak to me.

“I don’t believe you’re in a position to be making any requests, girl,” Harri says.

“What’s going on here?”

Morgen’s voice is rough and deep, but the question is composed without any sense of urgency as if she’s obligated to ask but doesn’t really care. When I turn to her, my heart jumps.

She's wearing black breeches and a stiff-collared charcoal coat with silver buttons. Her hair is gathered in a high ponytail. A few tendrils have come loose near her temples and the nape of her neck. I thought the blue tint in her grey streaks may have been a trick of the light that first night, but they shine clear as day in the sunlight. Threads of indigo and silver weave through the black.

"Caught these two strolling about," Harri says. "I know Jacques is always looking for reasons to get out of work, but the girl is ordering him about the ship. He's too easily persuaded. I'll take over his duties and oversee her rations myself."

The thought of this gruff old man tossing my food into my private cabin doesn't sit right with me.

"I only asked Jacques if I could stretch my legs."

"She might run her mouth the moment she reaches her family and have us thrown in a cage above the harbor." Harri's face turns a deeper shade of red. "She needs to be handled carefully if we want to get a ransom for her."

"A ransom or a reward? Am I a passenger or a captive?" I challenge him.

Morgen's hand lands on my shoulder.

"That depends on your perspective." Morgen's lips twitch, but her face stays stony otherwise. "And your behavior." She turns to Jacques. "You've only done as I've asked. You'll continue to look out for Snow. Harri, you'll report to Skye with the cleaning rotation for the crew's quarters."

"But—" Harri puckers his mouth like he's sucking on sour fruit.

"You're dismissed," she says to both of the men. "I'll have a word with Snow."

"Good day, m'lady," Jacques says, bowing his head. The kitchen hand-turned-guard stands a little taller now. "Captain."

When they're both gone, Morgen bumps my cabin door open with her hip and motions for me to go inside. I stumble back to the seat at the desk, and she prowls in behind me.

"Your snow whites," she says, holding her hand out.

"What are you going to do with them?"

"Burn them."

"They're sacred garments!"

“If you want to survive this world and your mother’s court, or worse—*your sister’s* court, then you’d better cut your ties to the temple fast.” She holds the bloodied, dirty fabric up and smirks. “You won’t last a week if you prance in there preaching about moonbeams.”

“Why do you care if I make it?”

“I don’t care what happens once your mother has paid for your safe return,” she replies. It stings every time she reminds me how little I’m worth. “Consider it free advice from someone who knows better.”

She lifts her thumb to the scab on my neck, studying the crusted wound.

“This is healing,” she says, her blue eyes a stormy shade as she peers through her black lashes. Her touch is so light against the sensitive area that I have to fight back a shiver.

“Glad to know your piece of gold will be untarnished when you make your trade,” I say, shaking myself from a trance. She is a pirate. A criminal. She doesn’t want to touch me like *that*, nor do I want her to.

“That’s right.” Morgen drops her hand to her hip and flexes her fingers a few times. “And I assume there are no issues with the clothes I found in the hold—” Her question fades along with her smug smile when she looks over my body. The breeches hug my curves so tight, I feel more naked beneath her gaze than I did in my see-through snow whites. “No issues,” she repeats.

“None,” I agree, and she heads for the door.

“You can have your walks, but mind the topics you speak about with Jacques, and don’t get any ideas about turning him against us. He’s a hard worker and loyal. He deserves respect, even from a would-be princess.”

“I don’t know what position you think I hold, but I’ve never put myself above anyone,” I say.

“Priestess, princess, servant, whatever you are, precious Snow—stay out of my way.”

The door slams behind her, rattling the latch with some force. I’m not sure what I’ve done to make her so angry, but her order is fine with me. I don’t want to get in her way and risk her stirring the pent-up energy coursing through my body if she touches me again. I want to think of her as angry and insulting. Anything to chase away the thought of that gentle touch finding its way to my most secret spots.

I sit down at the desk and skim my fingers over the surface of my cooled tea, making the beads of water rise and fall under the control of my magic.



SLEEP DOESN'T COME EASILY. I lie awake, staring at the walls with my eyes burning from reading in the dim light. I crave the weight of my thick quilt and the sound of my friends' breathing. In the coven dormitory, there was always a pair of arms willing to snuggle well into the night. I was never alone. I wonder if my friends are mourning my death or if they've figured out that I've run off. Will they be rooting for my escape or praying that Grimhilde will have her justice?

There are some things I don't want to know.

Sighing and turning on my side, I spot Morgen's jacket beneath the desk. She forgot to grab it when she discarded my gown. I carry it back to the bed and drape it over myself.

The leather is softened from wear, and it's a heavier layer than the scratchy blanket at the bottom of the cot. Its smoky scent is a nice reprieve from the sour air of the cabin. Skye probably won't be happy when they find out I've passed most of my time in here retching out my guts and stinking up the place. I try not to think of it or feel ashamed. There's nothing I can do about it.

Sticking my nose back beneath the collar, I breathe in deeply. A heady scent clings to the leather.

Morgen.

She must wear this jacket often. There's the warm, natural smell of her body embedded into the fabric. It's a powerful blend of distinctly human notes that make me think of sweating and panting in the dark. I rub my thighs together, forgetting I've stripped off the tight breeches until I feel the glide of my skin.

I shouldn't be doing this—thinking of her as I run my hands over my body, but a woman's sweat does things to my senses. Morgen is cold, I remind myself. Too cold to make me feel this way.

Shiloh used to pin my wrists and slide her knee between my thighs. She liked to toss me and pry me open. I work my hand down to my clit,

rubbing with the same rough intent the guard used on me, but when I picture her eyes, I can only see them as they were when I ran off—full of despair.

I bring my hand back up to my tit, circling my nipple. I don't need to imagine anything to work myself to the edge if I focus on how I feel. Coasting over my hips, I take my time to work back down to my mound, cupping myself gently before stroking a fingertip over the seam of my folds. It's getting harder to keep my mind a blank slate, and I stop fighting the questions and fantasies taking shape.

If Morgen had me in her grasp, would she dive down to my clit the way Shiloh always did, or would she tease and take her time before taking what she wanted from me? She was dining with that colonel in the tavern, so I can't be sure she'd *want* anything from me. It doesn't matter. She doesn't need to know that when my fingers brush along my folds, dipping into the waiting wetness, it's all an imitation of how she touched me earlier.

I bite down on my lip to stop a moan, teasing the tight bud of my clit past the point of sensitivity before I spread my thighs and work two fingers into myself. If it was the pirate captain, she'd plunge into me without urgency, I bet. She wouldn't give in to my pleas for release until she was ready.

"Please," I whisper to the walls, my entire body hot as I arch my back for more.

The key lock clicks and the door swings open just as I'm starting to curl my fingers. I pull them out immediately, my belly clenching in protest. There's no time to adjust myself or pretend like I'm sleeping, but a half-formed thought runs through my mind: *only the captain has the key*. Creaking floorboards and an intake of breath tell me I'm not alone.

Morgen pushes the door closed behind her. She's clutching a single chamberstick in a brass holder, and her hair falls to her waist in a silky sheet. I sit up and do my best to cover my thighs.

"What the devil are you doing still up at this time of night?"

There's a beat of silence, and I fear that she can hear the thoughts I've been having. Wicked thoughts of her and what she might look like beneath that billowy blouse and the bandages across her chest.

"Nothing. I couldn't sleep."

“I need you awake anyway.” Then in a lower voice, she adds, “Forgot you still had this.”

Morgen strides to the cot and touches the sleeve of the jacket as if she’s just remembering I have it. I curl up tighter beneath it. The movement gives me away, and her eyelids drop heavy when she sees the bare skin of my knee. “Why are you—” Her nostrils flare, and I wait for the blow to land when she comments on the sick scent in the room, but it never does. “*Oh.*”

She swirls around so fast that her red robe sweeps up near her ankles.

“Well, are you going to dress, or do you need me to do it for you?”

There are a few things I’d like to say to that, but I’m well aware of the sword hanging on her hip, so I tug on my breeches wordlessly, wriggling them up until I can button them.

“What’s this all about?” I ask her, pulling on my boots and tying the bottom of my blouse.

The combination of the candlelight and the hair loose around her shoulders softens Morgen’s face, but her stare is unyielding.

“They taught you the basics of herbal remedies and such at the coven, right?” She keeps her voice so low I can hardly hear her.

“Using the elements to heal is a basic principle of magic.” I don’t acknowledge the roll of her eyes when I use the word. “Healing is—was one of my main duties as a servant blue.”

“Then you can help to soothe a fever?”

“Are you ill?” I press my hand to her forehead, and she lowers it for me.

“Not me. It’s a crew member named Carys. She’s been with us for a few years, and as beloved as she is, all underworld will break loose if anyone suspects a spreading illness.”

“What makes you so sure it isn’t?”

“She found herself up the spout when we were stuck in Morevsk a few weeks back. Their laws don’t make it easy to find a safe surgeon to take care of such things, but she had the procedure, and she’s been hiding how ill she’s been since.”

“Let me take a look at her,” I say. A procedure to end a pregnancy can be simple enough in the right hands, but when one is done improperly, the complications can be deadly. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Morgen runs her palm over her thick robe and looks over my attire.

“It’s cool outside. You should wear the jacket.”

She’s waiting for me on the deck by the time I slip it on. The wind feels harsher without the sun’s warmth to dull its edge. I tighten the jacket around me as I follow along.

A crescent moon hangs in the clear sky, starting from scratch and growing slowly. Like me. My magic hums, begging me to look out into the ocean, to release some of its energy, but I stay close enough to Morgen that our knuckles brush a few times by accident.

“Stop that,” she says and switches the candle holder into the hand closer to mine.

“Didn’t mean to.”

She presses a finger to her lips to quiet my argument as we pass through a large room with rows of hammocks suspended from wood beams. Stray hands and feet flop over the sides. The main cabin is wonderfully noisy, filled with the sounds of snoring and rustling. It reminds me of home.

I’d much rather be staying here, surrounded by this, than lying alone at night.

We move around a long crate piled high with wooden bowls, and Morgen lifts a hatch.

“Carys,” she calls. “Are you awake?”

A woman lies on a straw bed, her red hair dark with sweat. Three figures stand around her. I groan when I see the quartermaster with his arms folded over his chest.

“She’s not speaking,” Skye says, lowering their foot from the wall to move closer to us. “Not sure what can be done at this point. We won’t be stopping for three more days.”

“Too far gone, in my opinion,” Harri adds.

“What will you have me do? Toss her overboard?” Morgen asks.

“If she becomes too costly or creates a panic, it might be the best option.” Harri scuffs his filthy boot on the floor. “We’re already spending a fortune on this whim of yours.” His eyes slide to me. “I don’t know why you’re bringing her into this. We have Cook. He’s as good as any surgeon.”

“The willow bark hasn’t done much good for her.” The man standing between Skye and Harri strokes his short brown beard. “We’re out of options.”

“Snowdrop fancies reading textbooks on healing,” Morgen says. “She might have something to offer.”

“We’re letting rich nobles tell us how to treat our crew now?” Harri barks out a laugh. “There are easier ways to get pretty women into your bed, Captain.”

A tense quiet falls over the room. All I can hear is Carys’ ragged breath.

“There are easier ways to stay alive, Harri,” Skye drawls, cleaning their fingernails with the tip of a knife. “You should probably shut the fuck up.”

Morgen sets the candle down and clasps her hands together.

“Yes, Harri. Make yourself useful and fetch some boiling water for Snow. The rest of you are dismissed. Thank you for your help.”

Once they’re gone, I drop to my knees and lift Carys’ arm. It’s limp and clammy, but her skin is burning hot. I push the hem of her blouse up, touching her belly and feeling her womb deep inside. I’m careful to keep my unwashed hands away from any delicate areas.

Closing my eyes, I sense the tainted energy within. It’s a decayed force that doesn’t match her own.

“There’s some tissue that needs to be expelled,” I murmur.

“How do you know?”

“Trust me,” I tell her. “There’s a medication that can help move things along.”

“We try to keep those tinctures stocked, but we’re low on supplies,” Morgen says, not questioning me any further. She sits on a crate. “Is there anything else that might get her through the next few days?”

My magic whispers to me.

You can help. It would be so easy...

“Red raspberry leaf might do the trick.” The tea is mostly helpful for women due to give birth, but I need an excuse to touch water. I press my hands between my knees to calm the urge to spend my power. Harri comes back in with the boiled pot, and Morgen sends him away again to fetch more supplies.

“Snow, are you going to be sick again?” she asks when she hands me the sack of dried herbs. I pour a cup to make the tea, knowing Carys won’t be able to drink it without help.

“No.”

My magic is a beating pulse that doesn't sync up with the rhythm of my heart. It's relentless, begging me to use it. I cup the mug and imagine the rot in Carys' body. Then I picture washing it away.

"Not too much," I whisper, but my magic is already drowning out my will. Blue light flares at my fingertips and seeps into the tea.

Morgen grabs my wrist.

"What kind of natural remedy is this?"

"Just trust me, please," I tell her. "I've done this before. It won't heal her, but it will keep the infection from spreading." She tightens her mouth but lets go of me to lift Carys' head. I let the magic spiral through me as I tip the liquid into her mouth.

The woman blinks her eyes open. "Am I still alive?" she groans as she curls onto her side.

"Yes, pet. We're going to get you help," Morgen tells her. "We'll keep you in here until we can get you to full recovery."

Carys throws an arm over her eyes.

"All right. I'll be back to work in a few days."

"Rest," Morgen says, not unkindly, but the tic in her jaw gives her away.

I can tell by the way she narrows her eyes at me before we pass through the berth that she's not going to let me go back to my room without a confrontation. I touch the scabbed wound on my neck, remembering Grimhilde's warnings to never let my power shine in front of anyone else.

I have to jog to keep up with Morgen's quick stride as we head back to the cabin.

"What was that?" she asks, pulling me to her when her back is pressed against the door. She slides her hand up to my wrist, studying my fingers. "I don't recall seeing any fae in your family's history, but that was not an herbal remedy or something you learned from stacking bones into pretty piles. That was..."

"Magic?" I offer.

"Is this why you're running?" she presses. "Did you get caught stealing magic from forbidden sources?"

"No. It occurs naturally, I swear."

"Explain it."

I look into Morgen's eyes, thinking of how I first felt my magic rise in me when I watched a fawn snap its neck while trying to clear a jump over a fallen tree. It's not so easy to explain. I don't even know how it happens.

"*We'll have to keep this secret,*" Grimhilde said when I told her how my tears glowed on the creature's soft brown pelt, then how it rose on its wobbly legs when I was sure it had died. "*The others won't understand.*"

Morgen's nostrils flare at my extended silence.

"If you can't talk about your magic, then tell me what you did with it that made your High Priestess want to kill you. Did you plot against her?"

"You said you didn't care which rules I broke."

"That was before I knew what you were capable of." That small voice starts up inside my head again. *There's something wrong with you.* "What did you do, Snow? You're no ordinary runaway. What kind of army is she going to send after you?"

"There's a chance she believes I'm dead," I tell her. Shiloh's betrayal still hurts, but would she tell Grimhilde that she'd broken her oath by letting me run? She was too dedicated to her position for that. She must have thought of something.

"What did you do?" she asks again, annunciating each word.

"Only what you saw back there." My jaw quivers as I remember the scene. "One day I was swimming with a companion, and a miner collapsed near the pond. He'd been impaled by one of the mining tools and left to bleed out. He managed to crawl toward the forest, desperate to get home to his family and die in peace. My magic called to me, so I cupped water in my palms and sang to him as I dripped it into his mouth. His life force returned enough to let me heal him."

"And she wants you dead for that?"

Disbelief flits over her face.

"It crossed a line. I knew I messed up when I did it. That's why I tried to hide it from her." I'm so tired of recounting all of the mistakes I've made that I don't even care that I'm spilling every single truth that could get me in trouble. "The man in the mirror showed her that I would become far too powerful to be trusted. She had to get rid of me to protect the kingdom." I didn't understand the danger of my capabilities back then, but Grimhilde did. "So I understand if you think I'm too much of a risk to have on the ship. I don't even know why I ran. I suppose I'm just a coward who didn't want to face my fate."

She takes a deep breath, and her ribs expand enough for our bodies to touch before she lets out an exhalation.

“I don’t think you’re a coward for wanting to live,” she says after my confession leaves me wilted in her grip. She loosens her hold and traces a finger along the base of my thumb. “There are two sides to every bit of magic. I’ve only ever known the half that breaks and bleeds, but what you did back there—that was the kind of magic that heals and shines light where it’s needed most.” She outlines my hand, barely touching me, but the slow grazing and her breath in my ear make my skin prickle into goosebumps. “Do you want to hurt people with your gifts?”

“No.”

“I think I’ll take your word over a prophecy from some man trapped in Grimhilde’s mirror. Just keep your gifts hidden from anyone who doesn’t have your trust, and be very careful about who you choose to share your secrets with.”

I wish I’d been given that advice years ago. I was so trusting. Everyone was my friend.

Morgen curls her long, slender fingers over my own, and her thumb swipes over the place where I was slick wet from touching myself with thoughts of her in my head. She lifts my hand close to her mouth, inhaling, and a fresh wave of heat swells through me.

“Fuck your High Priestess,” she says. “I’ll get you to your mother and collect a pretty payment. You’ll figure out the rest.”

“What if I don’t?” I ask her. “What if I never find my footing in Gentrilly?”

“You will. Clearly you don’t want to die,” she says, dropping my hand and moving to leave. “We all find ways to survive when we need to.”

The quill drips onto the ledger, and I rush to wipe the ink splotch away, smudging the words I've spent the past two hours writing.

I rub my eyes.

I don't want to be working this late, but these notes will be important if I want this transition to go smoothly. Besides, it's better than lying awake on the floor, remembering the way the blue light limned Snow's fingers when she poured the tea down Carys' throat.

Or how she looked beneath my jacket... and that musky scent...*was she?*

My pulse thumps in my sex, and my fingers twitch on the quill, thinking of the parts of her body she might have been exploring.

This is why I have to keep myself busy. Seeing the familiar leather covering her body as her hand moved from between her legs shouldn't give me such a thrill.

I dip the ink and start again.

The worst of Snow's horrible retching seems to be over, and it's quiet enough to concentrate. It's almost too quiet. I have half a mind to check on her and see if she's breathing, but I press down on the parchment and write a brief note to distract myself.

Defenseless creatures always make my insides scrunch up with a desire to protect them. It's a sickness my father worked hard to drive out of me, but sometimes my true nature prevails.

"If anyone ever gives you butterflies in your stomach, run," my father used to tell me. "That's your body's warning that your heart will do something stupid without your permission."

Dozens of the fragile-winged insects flutter through me when I think of Snow teetering on the edge of danger, completely unaware of the world that exists outside of her temple walls. For someone who's been taught to fear everything, she's warming up to the crew quickly. She keeps her cabin tidy and doesn't complain about the food. She's not only respectful to Jacques but kind when everyone treats him like the boat's punching bag. Then there's the matter of her magic, which she showed me all too freely. The Gentrillian nobles will eat her up alive, and part of me wants to help her.

But I won't. I can't.

I'm running.

Six barrels of rum. I scratch the words quickly, making a mental inventory of the things we can sell at port for some extra coin to spend. Things will be better when we arrive. A woman on my lap and some playtime with my treasure chest of toys. That's all I need.

I lean my head back against the high back of the chair. There was no time for fun in Lavinsar, and now I'm itching to get back on dry land. That must be the reason I'm so antsy.

A pink sunrise pushes against the grey of dawn, flooding the windows with soft light. Another sleepless night.

Two slow knocks are followed by two quick raps against my door, identifying my visitor.

"I'll be out in a minute," I call to Skye.

"It's urgent."

I grunt and wrap clean strips over the broken skin near my neck. The fresh eruption is a good sign, but the green scales make my stomach turn. They're tally marks for every horrible thing I've done. I touch one lightly. Could Snow's touch make them less painful?

I press down on the tender spot. Pain chases the impossible thought away. The scales are the best I can hope for. Sand sifts through the hourglass in the corner, the ever-present warning that Cosette is waiting. The top half is nearly empty now. It won't be long before the pain ends and the scales become part of my flesh.

I tug my boots and my second-favorite jacket on, avoiding the mirror. I don't want to see the new silver strands in my hair—the reminder that if I start to care too much, I might lose the only thing that's ever really been mine.

The rest will belong to someone else when the curse has run its course.

“You look like shit,” Skye says, their teeth still working on a piece of jerky as they drag their eyes over me.

“I’m so glad you woke me at the crack of dawn for that urgent piece of information.”

“In other news, we spotted a Gentrillian merchant ship.” They reach for their sword. “Want to keep moving or fly the flags?”

“Hmm.” I scrape my palm over the fresh bandages. I desperately want to get to dry land, but I can’t turn down the opportunity for a few essentials. “Fly the flags. Fire a warning shot when we’re in range. If they surrender, take what we need and get out.”

“If they don’t?”

“You know what to do but make it quick.”

They touch the corner of their hat. “Aye.”

The ship never had a first mate under my father’s command, but Skye deserves the title. The legacy of *The Ruined Soul* will be left in their capable hands.

They call for the crew to draw up the false flags. The sun crowns over the water, and Gentrillian rose flies high, a red spot on the blue and white canvas. By the time the merchants realize their mistake, it’ll be too late.

“We don’t have much time to waste if we want to anchor at a reasonable hour, Captain,” Lilah says, bouncing rolls of maps in her arms.

“This shouldn’t take long,” I assure her.

“The Gentrillian noble searching for her family won’t complicate matters, will she?”

“No, why would—” I trail off, following Lilah’s eyes to the starboard railing where Snow is pointing at the incoming ship. “*Shit.*”

“It’s from Gentrilly!” Snow squeezes Jacques’ arm like they’re the best of chums. I can’t hear what she’s chattering on about, but she hurries away and runs straight into me.

She lifts her face, and I brace my hands on my hips, staring her down.

“It’s good news, isn’t it?” she asks. A slow smile spreads across her face, dimpling her cheeks. “You can hand me over to them, and I’ll be out of your way. It’s a win for both of us.”

“Hand you over to sailors-for-hire who probably aren’t carrying any coin?” Her expression dims. “I plan on collecting my payment for your

safe transport.”

“I’m sure Snow will put a good word in with her family. She’s probably just ready to get home,” Jacques helps her. Losing his knighthood damn near killed him—that’s the only reason I hold myself back from growling at him. His attempt at being an honorable man is grating on my nerves today.

“Take her to her room,” I order.

“Sorry, my lady,” he says to Snow and she twists around to look at me. She wants to argue, but I can see how close the merchant ship is. There’s no time to listen to her protest.

The warning shot goes off from the top deck. The blast rattles her body, and Jacques rushes to soothe her. “It’s ok. Just a warning shot.”

She spins right out of his grasp, gaping at the black flag rising on the main mast. A skull to replace the Gentrillian rose. “Are you going to hurt them?”

I open my mouth to tell her I’m not planning on it, as long as they surrender the loot we’re looking for, but I swiftly click my teeth together.

What the fuck am I doing? I don’t explain myself to anyone. I’m the captain.

“Take her to her room,” I tell Jacques again. Let him deal with her.

There’s a merchant ship with white flags flapping in the wind waiting for me.



“SHOULD BE ready to anchor in about an hour,” Skye says. “What are you going to do about the snow white?”

“Careful,” I warn before answering. “We won’t be staying in Seshly for long.” We’ll spend two nights in the port city, and a good portion of the crew will sleep aboard instead of making camp at the beach. I’ll be taking a room at the inn, but that does leave Snow in a vulnerable position. “Jacques is doing a fine job of looking after her. She’ll stay here.”

Skye cocks their head to the side. It’s a terrible idea. I already know it is, but I don’t like the other option, or how my blood rushes when I think of putting myself in charge of her safekeeping.

“Things get wild when we drop the anchor. Do you really want to leave her here with one man to protect her? What if the crew gets a hankering for a taste of something more refined?”

Their pale brow arches high.

My blood runs cold. They wouldn't dare to step that far out of line to touch her. But after a long stretch at sea, dark cravings and violent passions can flow as freely as the rum. I can picture Snow running around on the deck, trying to make friends when she knows I'm not here to stop her. A pretty little disaster waiting to happen.

“Fine. She'll come along with me.” I clench my fists until my knuckles crack.

Skye smirks. “You've been on edge since we brought her on board. Are you sure you're not the one craving a certain elegant dish?”

“I'm on edge because I had to make bedroom eyes at Colonel Antoni when all I wanted was to have a woman's thighs warming my ears.”

“That's what you get for not sticking to our plan.”

“I'll make up for it tonight,” I say, and their laughter fades behind me as I climb down into the hold to collect the spoils from our latest plunder. Most of the cargo was useless to us, but we did find a few chests of medicine and a heap of clothing that will hold up to the cold.

We happened upon it just in time—the weather will be turning as we head up north. And I'm more than pleased to get Snow out of those damn form-fitting breeches if I have to keep running into her on the deck.

When I have a crate filled, I find I'm walking too quickly. I'm too excited to have a reason to speak with her again. For the past two days since we took the merchant ship, she's done her best to avoid me, turning her face away or circling around if she sees me coming near.

I knock this time and hear her shuffle across the floor.

“Jacques?”

“No,” I answer and hear her hesitation. Her hair fluffs up around her face with a gust of wind as she swings the door open. She closes her eyes and pointedly turns her chin over her shoulder.

“Have you come to ask for my services after brutalizing my countrymen?” she asks.

“I didn't brutalize them,” I argue before I can stop myself. “They surrendered without a fight. A few of them even asked to work with me.”

She blinks at that.

“I don’t believe it. They’d give up a royally-appointed position to serve pirates?”

I lean against the doorframe. “They’d been at sea for an extended mission. They were tired and miserable. If their queen wasn’t paying them enough for their troubles, then I can’t blame them for not wanting to sail for her anymore.”

Those men would have happily taken Snow with them and given her up for the best offer they could find. They were so ready to be done with Gentrilly. There wasn’t a drop of loyalty left in them.

“Anyways, that’s not why I came.” I shove the crate forward. “You’re coming with us on this stop. Thought you might want to get changed into something more suitable.”

I try not to look at the outfit she has on.

She takes the box and sets it on the floor. “I won’t wear things you stole from my mother’s kingdom,” she huffs and crosses her arms over her chest.

“Are you serious?” My anger rises. Her self-righteousness digs beneath my skin. “I don’t care what you wear, but you seem to be unaware that your mother is infamous for her war crimes, and you grew up under the guardianship of a High Priestess who committed just as many. They say she plucks people from their homes and brings them to her dungeon whenever she fancies it.”

“The mirror shows Grimhilde when someone is plotting something evil or defying the will of the Goddess.”

“You still stick up for her,” I state.

“She only tries to keep the kingdom safe.” She squeezes her arms. “I can’t blame her if she thought I was dangerous.”

“Do you know what I think?” Snow turns her head from me. “I think she built walls and locked you away to convince you she was protecting you from all the scary things outside, but the true horror was always within.”

“And I should feel better about you—a pirate who commits murder and petty theft for fun?”

“Petty theft? I needed medicine for Carys that would have been too expensive to buy on shore. Now we can sell the rest for half the price so people at the port will actually be able to afford it. I think it’s a lot better than your royal merchants tossing what they don’t sell back into the sea.”

This dampens her defiance.

“They really toss what doesn’t get bought?”

“Yes, Snow, and many people will never get the treatment they need because some lord or lady isn’t willing to cut the price. Everything in this world is about profit.”

Her face opens with a willingness to understand. It’s more than I’m expecting from her.

I think I can try to speak less harshly to her. She’ll see the world for what it is soon. In Gentrilly, the beggars on the street will be visible from her palace window, and somehow I don’t think that will sit right with her.

“Is Carys ok?” she asks.

“She’ll be fine. She’s going to stay in Seshly for two weeks to recover, and she’ll take command of a smaller ship in my fleet.”

There are unanswered questions dangling between us, but I’ve already said enough.

I don’t know what it is about this woman that makes me want to earn her approval or justify myself. I only know that I need to gain control of my thoughts again.

“Be ready to go when I fetch you.”

The bonfire rises high on the beach. I perch on a driftwood log, watching the crew blow off steam. Someone has gotten their hands on a godsdamn fiddle. Whether or not the notes they're scratching out can be called music is up for debate, but people are making merry anyway.

I take a swig of rum straight from the bottle.

"Come on, Cap'n!" Griff waves to me and spins Sampson beneath his arm. "You've not had any fun in months." He pulls his lover to him. They both sway happily together, their bare feet covered in grey sand.

"I'm good where I am." I wipe my mouth on the back of my sleeve.

The shoreline bulges out here, forming an extra pocket of dry land. The tents are set up far enough from the ocean that we won't have to worry about the high tide, but close enough to fish and run through the waves on this mild night without losing sight of the camp.

I'd like to crawl into one of the tents and tune the whole night out, but my fare for the inn has already been paid, and I can't risk Snow getting any ideas about running off. The back of the building looms ahead of us. Roses bloom black in the night where they're vining over the cream-colored stone walls.

From this spot, I have a clear view of the room at the end of the hall. The warm buzz of alcohol settles in, and I forget to stop my eyes from darting there. A heart-shaped face peeks from the cracks between the lattice-shuttered windows.

I lift a finger from the bottleneck in a greeting to Snow and she ducks below the sill. Biting back a grin, I try to pick up on the string of

conversation around me.

“All I’m saying is you seem wound a little tighter than usual lately,” Griff continues. Sampson moves to cover his mouth, but he keeps talking. “It might do you some good to let loose. Where’s what’s-her-name? The one you always visit when we’re in Seshly?”

“Cassandra,” I say and set the bottle down. It’s not helping. “She’s busy.”

She was already sitting next to the captain of *The Surreal Jewel* when we arrived, her head resting on his shoulder with her blonde curls spilling over his chest. She passed by me in a haze of lilac perfume while I paid the innkeeper for our lodging.

“Tomorrow,” she whispered.

But my bad mood had descended like a dark cloud by the time I showed Snow to the room. Tomorrow might as well be a year away if it means I’ll have to face another sleepless night.

“She can’t be the only person who suits your fancy,” Lilah quips, not looking up from the chart she’s drawing in the sand. “Skye has had no trouble finding partners.”

I spear a chunk of fish with my knife and turn it over the fire.

“The others lack Cassandra’s skills.” She has a knack for making me forget where I am without touching me, and I sorely need to forget my troubles for a bit. The hourglass is running out, and each day I grow a little more restless. It’s hard to pretend anything feels good when the end of everything I know is near. Even the best food turns to ash in my mouth, and every attempt at humor falls flat. “I hope the bastard is paying her worth at least.”

“You haven’t paid a visit to the sea witch lately,” Harri says, dropping onto the log next to me. He waggles his eyebrows at me, and his golden tooth glints in the firelight. “Maybe that’s who you’re really longing for.”

“Don’t mention her.” I take another drink for good measure. Cosette is the last fucking person I want to think about tonight. Or ever. “She hasn’t summoned me in two years. I’d like it to be longer.”

“I’ve never seen a woman hold on to her youth and beauty like that.” Harri cups his hands in front of his chest in a lewd gesture. “Now, that’s my kind of magic. Always figured she was the thing that drove you and your father apart. He didn’t seem to like it when she set her eyes on you.”

Harri can guess all he wants, but I can never explain what kind of power the sea witch holds. My tongue ties itself in knots anytime I try. It was the same for my father. We could only ever discuss it fully with each other.

“Hmm.” I tip back and make a noncommittal noise.

“Why don’t you take a taste of the fine lady before you ransom her off?” Rhys laughs. I snap my head up to look at the cabin boy. His stringy red hair sticks to his pimpled forehead, covering his eyes. “I saw her complaining about having to stay in the room. Seems feisty.”

“No one touches Snow,” I glower and stand to pull the bottle of cheap clear liquor from his hands. “Go to bed, child. You’re far too young to be slugging this sort of grog.”

“Aye,” Harri agrees. “Get back to your tent before you get yourself in trouble.”

“Was only havin’ a bit of fun,” Rhys says. He swings an arm out for his bottle and misses it.

“A little corruption might do her good,” a seaman named Andrews says, pumping his hips. “I volunteer to give her something to think about for years to come when she’s lying beneath her stuffy spouse at night.”

Gods, that *is* the most likely scenario for her. A suitable marriage to keep her from vying for her sister’s throne while solidifying a military alliance. She’ll be wed to some noble accustomed to people with fine manners and gentile upbringings. Not a woman who sings to the moon each night and polishes her furniture while keeping her magic wrapped up tight.

Anger rushes straight to my head.

Andrews’ mouth hangs open, his laughter dying in his throat.

“You will not speak of her. You will not look at her.”

“Sorry, Captain.” He backs up, nearly tripping on a pile of sand.

“If I catch your eyes on her, I will pluck them out as a precaution.”

“All right, I’ll pretend I don’t see her,” he says, holding a hand over the side of his face as he walks back to the tents with an arm around Rhys to keep him from staggering.

Harri nudges me with his elbow. “Thought you told your delicate flower to stay in the room. Could’ve sworn I heard you threaten her with keelhauling if she left.”

“I did.” The corner of my mouth ticks up. Jacques told me about Snow’s concerns, and the mere mention of the punishment was enough to make her stop pleading to explore the port. “But some of these men need a reminder that she’s off-limits.”

“Doesn’t help that she keeps trying to mingle with them herself.” He pulls a fishbone from his mouth and jabs it in the direction of the inn.

“What are you on about, Harri?”

I do a double-take past the fire, convinced I must be hallucinating. A woman is marching against the wind, her buttery yellow gown blowing against her body. It cannot be Snow. She wouldn’t dare.

But there’s no mistaking that soft pout or the new dress I stuffed in the crate for her.

I toss Rhys’ bottle aside and jog to meet her.

“What are you doing out here?” I circle around her so she’ll have to turn from the crowd gathered on the beach to speak to me. She doesn’t answer immediately. “Did something happen?” I lower my voice. “Did someone try to get in the room?”

Her hair is pulled back with a red ribbon tied in a bow, but several strands slip free and fly past her face.

“No,” she huffs. “But I’ve had plenty of time to think, and I have you all figured out.”

“Do you, now?”

“Yes.” She shimmies her shoulders with smug satisfaction. “You can threaten me with punishments all you like, but I know your secret.” She rises up on her toes, and her words carry on a purring breath. “You won’t harm me. There’s nothing you can do to make me stay in that room.”

The challenge sends heat sparking through me, melting the frost off my mood.

“I could toss you back in there and slide furniture over the door until it’s time to leave, or I could bind your hands.” I wave my knife like I’m checking items off a list. “As long as I get you to your mother, safe and sound.”

She rocks back down to her heels with a *hmpff*.

“Please.” Her eyes fan wide, the flames casting gold specks in their brown depths. “I’m so bored and lonely.”

Her defiance is dying away. It’s the weakness of her plea that makes my chest tighten.

We're on similar paths, her and I, spiraling closer to a future we don't understand. We might end up at very different destinations, but neither will allow either of us to keep the things we hold dear.

One night of fun won't hurt.

"Fine," I relent, hardly believing myself. She looks as skeptical as I feel.

"Really?"

"Yes, but don't leave my sight," I say, composing myself. "And no talking about moonlight, bones, or *magic*."

I hold out my knife, offering the bit of fish on the tip. She makes a face but takes the meat between her teeth. Her eyes water from the charred flavor. One taste of the nightlife with this crew and I bet she'll never hunger for another.

"All right, Snow. Let's go do some pirate shit."



SNOW DOESN'T STAND IDLY by the fire for long before she starts clapping in time with the fiddle's off-tune music. The seaman playing the crude instrument hops closer to her, showing a toothy grin as she dances for him. She gets swept up in the arms of the crew members, taking sips of their drinks and laughing at their lewd jokes for hours.

I stay close enough to hear her if she starts spouting off about any topic that might give her away while giving her the space to live a little. The task keeps me focused on the present.

"Is that wise?"

I smell the cloves on Skye's breath before I see them standing near my shoulder.

Snow starts to swing her hips around the fire. Griff and Sampson give her a wary look before taking turns twirling her beneath their arms.

"Dancing never hurt anyone. I'll make an exception for the night." I shrug. "I'm surprised you came up for air long enough to notice her."

A grin spreads across their face. Bite marks pepper their neck and there are rouge stains on their open collar.

"Kind of hard not to notice her. A noblewoman who can dance like that is a rare sight."

I catch her inching up the hem of her gown, teasing the sight of her bare thighs until I can almost see the shadow of her cunt. Lust rises in a thick wave that I have to swallow down. My face feels hot from watching the bawdy dance.

“My gods.”

Jacques’ mouth drops open, his entire shiny head flushing scarlet. “Her family will think I’m a horrible guardian if I allow her to associate with us like this.”

“Come off it,” Skye says. “The nobles aren’t going to welcome you back into their good graces now that you’ve been dropped down low with the rest of us. Keep her safe and mind your business. I’m sure she won’t be boasting about any of this.”

Jacques clasps his hands, resigning himself to keeping watch. His heart and mind have been fragile since the war, but giving him meaningful tasks seems to help. He’s a man who needs a purpose. He’s holding out for his honor to be restored, but Skye is right—once the highborn nobles cast you down, there’s no coming back.

“I say we let the girl have some fun,” Carys cackles. She’s got her arm propped up on a log and her black corset tied loosely. There’s some color in her cheeks today, but that could be from what’s in her flask. “She deserves it. I swear she worked a miracle on me. Thought I was going to die.”

“She used herbs to bring your fever down. The medicine saved you,” I mutter, watching Harri bristle though he pretends to be paying full attention to Lilah’s explanation of astronomical distances.

“Ahh, but it felt like a miracle.” She touches her stomach. “It was like being folded up in cool, blue light.”

“Should you be drinking after being so ill?” I snap. “You’re staying here to recover, not party.”

“It’s just a nip of rum to help me sleep.”

I sigh and loosen my shoulders. I don’t want to be harsh, but she’s steering the conversation toward Snow’s magic, and Harri’s ears like to pick up on the smallest details.

I don’t like how he watches Snow’s every movement, or how he keeps voicing his concerns in front of the others.

“*Harri will try to take my place if you don’t,*” my father warned me when the hacking cough rattled his lungs.

“But he’s your most loyal friend,” I’d protested.

“We don’t have friends, pet,” he’d wheezed. “He’s the type you either have to keep around or kill. Can’t trust him if you get on his bad side.”

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Harri says, tearing me from my thoughts. I don’t look at him. I don’t want to talk to him anymore tonight or hear his opinions about bringing Snow along.

I have one last plan to carry out, and I will see it through.

“No, I was just thinking about one.”

I kick up sand and take a seat in the shadows of the dunes to get a closer look at Snow and her audience. They’re more focused on her movements than their own. Her body writhes and winds as she slides her skirts up and down in a rhythmic motion.

I’m just as captivated as the rest of them when she strokes her thighs with her fingertips, parting her lips.

My pulse rushes. I grind my teeth.

No one is to touch her, I scold myself. *Especially not me.*

I press the pad of my thumb to the sore spot below my collarbone, the fresh pain reminding me that I am a monster. I must be a monster for a while longer if I want to collect my reward and set *The Ruined Soul* on a fair course before someone else takes the helm.

With the threats in the sea this time of year, and the conflict that’s sure to be brewing between Lavinsar and Gentrilly again, I will need to be ruthless to keep Gwen safe.

“Fuck,” I whisper aloud and run my hands through my hair like I can stop the new strands of silver from threading through the black.

Pressing my palms to my temples, I change the thought. *I only need to keep Snow safe to deliver her to her mother. That’s all.* I blow out a breath and fist handfuls of sand.

She’s a bag of gold. That’s the only way I can view her. A tempting bag of gold with her head tossed back, laughing at the sky.

“She’s coming back!” she exclaims, pointing at the crescent moon. A few of the crew mates look confused, but I know what she’s talking about. She spins around. “It gives me hope, knowing she always comes back.”

“Fucking underworld, woman,” I seethe and cross the beach to get her before they all realize she’s not babbling nonsense. She lays her head on my chest the moment I touch her arm.

My heart slams against my ribs when she wraps her arms around me.

“Have you come to dance with me beneath the glowing light of the moon?” she laughs. I lift her chin with my finger, and her eyes stay shut. Her teeth sink into her lower lip.

“I don’t think the lady can hold her liquor,” a seaman shouts.

“Obviously,” I mutter, glaring at the lot of them.

“It’s like being back on the boat,” Snow says, swaying and pressing her forearm over her eyes.

“Lean on me,” I whisper, keeping an arm tight around her. “I’ll get you back to the room.”

She hums a tune to herself, nuzzling her cheek against me.

“Sing along, Captain,” she says, bobbing her head as I help her climb the cobblestone steps to the tavern. “You know the words.”

“I actually don’t. We didn’t learn that one in Corstyliia.”

She stops abruptly, nearly causing me to trip over her.

“I didn’t know you were from Corstyliia,” she gasps.

“It’s not that surprising. Plenty of the crew was born there.” I bring her into the main hall of the tavern. Raucous laughter booms around us. This port thrives on smuggled goods, and the taverns and shops cater to pirates. There’s always a party going on.

Men in ragged outfits lift large mugs and arm wrestle. A woman dances on a long table, but her performance doesn’t compare to Snow’s sultry moves on the beach.

“Isn’t it a magical place though? All the stories make it sound so romantic. I love the tales of Aeron. There isn’t a love story greater than King Casimir and Queen Eilwyn’s.”

“I was only in Corstyliia for a short time as a child before I was whisked off to sea. I only see it when I’m passing through now.” But I think of the tall black cliffs, and the dark blue waves smashing against the rocks and feel a hint of wistfulness. I block it out. *I yearn for nothing.* “I’m descended from Eilwyn and Casimir, though, so consider yourself in the presence of royal blood.”

She cracks one eye open, searching my face.

“Wait a second.” Her mouth rounds. “No, you’re poking fun at me. I’m not *that* far gone.” She squeezes my waist, trying to pull me toward the bar. “Let’s have a little more.”

“No, you’ve had quite enough. Let’s put you to bed.”

She lolls her head on my shoulder while I finagle the key in the lock.

The room is small but clean. The hardwood floor has been polished recently, and the pillows smell like sachets of lavender.

"There's only one bed," she says. "Are we going to share?"

"No." The plush mattress sinks in when I lie her down on it. "You can have it."

I push myself away from her, but she catches the brown cord dangling from my neck. I hold my breath, watching her uncurl her fingers to reveal the pendant in her palm.

"This is pretty," she says, studying the sparkling surface of the dark blue stone. Her eyes go to my face. "Who did you steal this from?"

I snatch it and tuck it back beneath my shirt, where it belongs. "I didn't steal it. It was my mother's."

"Oh," she breathes, her eyelids slipping lower. "Does she mind you being a pirate?"

"I don't know. She died when I was born. I don't suppose she cares."

"I'm sorry. I know it's not the same thing, but I used to pretend my mother was dead. I keep forgetting she exists. All of this still feels like a horrible dream." She turns her head toward the window where the moon sends thin slices of light over the ocean. "But I'll be ok as long as *she* stays with me."

I want to tell her to knock off her talk of lunar nonsense, but it sounds like it's the only thing staving off the hopelessness in her voice.

"You should get some sleep," I mumble, realizing I'm still leaning over her. She presses her fingertip to my nose.

"Boop. *You* should get some sleep."

I jump back, holding my face where she touched it. "Stop that."

"Or what? You'll tie me to the bow of the ship?"

"I'm considering it."

Her eyes go wide, then her nostrils flare and she bursts out in a trill of laughter. *Hehehehehe*. My lips twitch as she rolls about.

"Do you know who you remind me of? Matilda of the servant blues," she answers her question without pausing for a breath. I stare at her with no idea of how to respond or who the devil Matilda is. "*No Gwen*." Her voice pitches high in a mocking tone. "Stop making so much noise in the dormitory. It's past curfew." She pulls the grey blankets around her. Short waves of her brown hair fall over the tassled edges. "You act like such a

grump, but the truth is you'd be perfectly pleasant to be around if you'd pull the stick out from your ass."

I let out a stunned laugh, and she lowers the covers, patting the mattress. "Come to bed," she says and leans on her forearms. Her breasts fill out the scooped neckline of the plain yellow dress deliciously. There's an invitation in her words, an eagerness in her eyes.

I slump into the green wing-backed armchair next to the window.

"No. You're loaded to the gunnels." *And I know better than to ever let myself curl up beside someone who makes me forget my misery for a few complete hours.* "You're going to feel bloody terrible as it is. It'll be even scarier if you wake up next to me."

She falls asleep in a fit of giggles, and I smile, watching the moon from the window for a long time. I wait for the fires to die down on the beach before I stretch out on the floor with my hand wrapped around my knife.

Flecks of water hit my face, pulling me from a dream where I was stuck inside Grimhilde's scrying mirror, wandering the shadowy hall of reflections. I rub my lips together, soaking up the moisture greedily. My throat is parched, and my head pounds like someone took a saw to my skull and filled it up with salt rocks.

"Time to wake up, precious Snow."

Morgen stands at the side of the bed, flicking her fingertips out and spraying me with another small downpour of warm water. There's a slight curve to her mouth, the faintest hint of a smile, like the one I saw last night. My vision doubles before snapping back to normal—*last night*.

I remember the rum-soaked night in fragments that are more abstract thoughts and feelings than clear pictures—the lively bowing of a fiddle, the waves flowing in a continuous pattern, the slim beam of moonlight igniting my spirit, and warm, unmistakable desire when I fell into bed.

Goddess, did I?

Oh. I did. I tried to get the captain to join me between the sheets.

She stands over me now, waiting for me to sit up. I do, slowly. I asked her to bed, and she flat-out refused. My tongue felt too loose last night, and I must have forgotten myself. If I questioned if there was a spark of heat in her eyes that night she traced my fingers on the ship, now there's no doubt that she was only appraising my magic.

"Now that you're up, you can wash and get ready to head to the market."

A large silver basin sits on the heavy wood nightstand. Steam curls up invitingly, reminding me how much I crave fresh water and clean skin.

“Washing sounds nice.” I swing my legs off the bed, my knees brushing hers as I slide past. Soaking a rag in the rose-scented water, I unlace my gown and rub the warm cloth over my neck. It feels so good that I make a small noise. My magic wants to play, but I have no task to use it for, no chore or ritual to set. And besides, I can feel Morgen’s eyes on my back.

“What are you doing?” she snaps.

The water is clear except for the rose petals floating on top, so I haven’t accidentally let my magic loose in front of her. I spin around, holding my loose bodice over my breasts.

“Washing, like you said.” I frown at the red splotches forming above her collar. “Have I done something wrong?”

“You could’ve waited for me to leave before you started undressing.”

“You could have left a little faster,” I retort. Last night’s rejection left me raw, and my face reheats quickly from her obvious displeasure. “Don’t pirates wash together on deck?”

“Yes, but you’re not a pirate,” Morgen says, taken aback. She closes her eyes and exhales through her nose. Her hair is coiled into a damp knot at the nape of her neck and her clothes are clean. She must have washed and dressed before I woke up. “It’s one of those things that you need to learn before you arrive at the palace. Nobles have the luxury of privacy and bathing solo.”

“What a silly waste of water.” I toss the cloth back in the tub. My stomach is churning from last night’s rum and the hard realization that I know very little about royal rules and expectations. I can’t even impress the pirates. “I think I’ll lie down after I wash. I don’t feel up to the market today.”

She chuckles mirthlessly. “You’ve proven that you like sneaking away too many times for me to trust you’ll stay put. I’m keeping you with me.” My stomach growls rudely. “Besides, you need some food to soak up all the grog. I’ll be out in the hall waiting when you’re ready.”

I don’t feel like challenging her when breakfast is on the line. I turn back to the basin, wringing out the cloth while she exits the room.

Trying not to let her disgust get to me, I list all the things I’ll need to remember when I arrive in Gentrilly as I wash. *Keep your devotion to the moon private, don’t use magic, and be careful about personal space. Certainly don’t drink more than one glass of champagne.* I scrub my skin

until it's pink and stinging. *Lock yourself away. Act like you've always dreamed of being the princess you were born to be. Take whatever life fate hands you because it's better than being a pile of bones holding up Grimhilde's altar.*



I TRAIL behind Morgen's entourage with Jacques at my side. The cobbled streets smell of smoke and sewage, turning up my queasiness. Vendors lean out from stalls made of wood beams and canvas tarps, holding out filets of fish and baubles for sale.

"Do you need to find somewhere to sit, my lady?" my companion asks as a gust of wind sends discarded paper wrappers tumbling over my boots.

"No, thank you," I reply. "I'd rather keep moving."

The oddities being sold grow stranger the further we stray from the port. A woman walks out from between two buildings with a serpent wrapped around her neck, and a man opens his jacket, revealing pockets of gem-encrusted knives. I step closer to Jacques, glad that Morgen has hardly looked at me since she handed me a plate of fried dough stuffed with jelly this morning. She'd see the uneasiness on my face and surely judge my unworldly view—this place looks like it's filled with all of the vices and evils we were warned existed outside of the Moon Coven's temple walls.

"I think we're better off cutting through the sea serpents' territory than chancing the cyclones further west." Lilah's voice drifts through the alleyway as I approach the spot where Morgen's officers have all stopped. Lilah holds a spear that nearly reaches her chin with its base on the ground. She spins it between her palms. "You've taken a few of them down, Harri. What do you think?"

The quartermaster plucks it from her hand. "Nice craftsmanship. I hate those snakes, but I'd rather face them than risk running into a wicked storm this time of year. We'll need to be prepared to handle the afancs at the Gentrillian border anyways. What's one more monster to fight?"

"I've heard the afancs are quite ravenous this year." A vendor places a spear with a launching mechanism on Skye's shoulder to test its size.

“Watch where you aim that thing,” Sampson scolds, loading his bandolier with the ammunition he’s purchased. Skye winks and produces a bag of coins for the man at the stall.

“Will there really be afancs on the way?” I ask Jacques, sweat prickling cold on my neck. I’ve seen illustrations of the creatures in textbooks, but they look so frightening it’s hard to believe they’re real.

“Aye,” he says, patting my shoulder. “It’s nesting season for the monsters, so the sea is teeming with all sorts of awful creatures. But that’s not for you to worry about. I wouldn’t let one get near you.”

“Thank you, Jacques.”

I try to look reassured, but the crew has spent the past several hours trading goods and loading up on the supplies they’ll need to venture into dangerous waters. Dread rolls my breakfast into heavy balls.

Morgen doesn’t discuss her plans like the others do; she stays tight-lipped as she peruses trays of flintlock pistols, only giving clipped answers when asked. I check her face and posture periodically, searching for clues about who or what the captain likes, but she gives nothing away. Her expression stays blank and her spine is stiff. Even when the cabin boy with stringy red hair comes sprinting through the alley, she doesn’t rush to meet him. She turns to him with cool disinterest on her face.

“Rhys,” Harri shouts. “What the devil is wrong? Did you sell the barrels?”

The young man pants, bracing his hands on the knees of his dirt-stained trousers. “I sold them without any trouble, sir.”

“Then why are you in such a panic? You nearly toppled that vase over,” Morgen says, fitting a brass pistol inside her jacket while the vendor pockets a coin. A loud chime rings through the air, sending seagulls squawking and soaring above us. The sound repeats three times.

“The city bells,” Skye states, their eyes following the flock before cutting to Rhys. “What did you hear, boy?”

“There’s been an announcement in the square. It’s Gentrilly’s would-be princess,” Rhys answers, pulling his grimy hat off. I’m waiting to hear the news with bated breath as if he can possibly tell me something about my well-being that I don’t already know. “She’s dead.”

Jacques marks his forehead in the sign of the Gods with his thumb swiping across his forehead. Harri juts his jaw out, and Carys sets her spyglass down, mouth open.

Morgen stares at me. I don't dare to react.

"Bet it was the High Priestess," Carys says.

"No, they're saying it was a lover's spat." Rhys pulls a rolled pamphlet from his pocket. He unrolls it and places it in Morgen's hands. "On the night of her snow white ceremony, her lover became so jealous she tore her heart out and handed it to Grimhilde in a box."

"I know Queen Isobel did what she thought was best, but she never should have agreed to the terms," Jacques says, cradling his hands in front of his chest. "At least not that one. I held the would-be princess in my arms when she was born. I was still in the service then, and my lord's family had been visiting the palace." He shakes his head, tears fogging his eyes. "Kissed the babe's head and gave her my blessing."

"You're getting all weepy over some girl who grew up in the luxury of the temple." Carys hands Jacques a handkerchief. "Rest easy knowing the poor brat probably never knew pain until they cut her heart out."

"How can you be so uncaring about it?" Jacques crumples the damp fabric. "You're Gentrillian."

"Yes, but I'm not a Gentrillian knight or some royal whose titles being stripped was the worst thing that ever happened to her. Plenty of kids her age were orphaned because of her mother, stripped of their homes, and left to starve. So pardon me if I won't cry for her, and you shouldn't either. None of them would give you the sweat off their asses, let alone restore your knighthood."

Morgen steps between them, passing the parchment to Harri. He holds the scroll open, revealing the portrait of a woman dressed in a white gown, the moon a disc behind her, her hair flowing to her waist, and her palms held up in humble piety.

It's supposed to be me, but I feel like the rest of them, staring at an icon of a saintlike figure. The lines of my face are drawn too harshly, and my eyes are too symmetric.

"We don't take sides here. Our loyalty is only to each other and the open seas," Morgen lectures. "But the bells are ringing, and I bet the royals who turn a blind eye to our misdeeds won't like to see us out in public so brazenly on this day of mourning. We need to get out of here. We'll split up and keep extra guards on the camp."

"We'd better move quick," Jacques says as the bells toll again. He's already moving to guide me back to the tavern, drying his eyes to keep a

closer watch on our surroundings as people scramble to take their wares from the shops and fold down their makeshift carts.

“For what it’s worth,” I tell him quietly, “I think the would-be princess was fortunate to have had your blessing.” He gives me a weak smile, his eyes watering again, but Morgen appears out of nowhere, tapping his shoulder.

“I need you to make sure Rhys gets back to camp without a detour.” She glances at the cabin boy wagging his tongue at two women in bright red dresses. “I’ll see Snowdrop back to the tavern.”

She presses her hand to the small of my back, waiting until we’re clear of Jacques before she speaks. “Are you all right?”

The question is so soft coming from that harsh mouth.

“I’m fine.”

“I’d be concerned if I heard the news of my death.”

I don’t want to think too hard about it. As long as I let that portrait of the woman with the moon rising behind her stay as it is in my head—a painted symbol—then my reality can’t come crumbling down around me. Because even though I’m alive and well, that version of me is gone. A piece of my heart in a box of everything I left behind.

“It’s good news, really,” I say, fidgeting with lint in my jacket pockets. “They won’t be looking for me if I’m dead.”

“You’re clever.”

“Who? Me? The girl who rambles on about rainbows and moonbeams?”

She lifts her hand from my back, rubbing her fingers together. There’s a sharp edge to her smile. “It’s not like you can help where you were raised, or what you were taught, but you catch on quickly. I think you might be all right after all, as long as you pay attention and don’t drink copious amounts of alcohol at dinner parties. And on the bright side, look how loved you are.”

The only thing I’m sure of is the fact that none of these people *love* me. The tears dampening my portrait are shed in mourning for a manufactured memory of me. The High Priestess is not sobbing over my heart. No one has ever wanted to possess me so badly that they’d kill me to keep me.

I say a silent prayer that Shiloh remains unscathed, but the thought of her refills my deep well of worry.

“There was a smaller jacket in that crate,” Morgen says, stirring the conversation before my thoughts can settle on the topic of the stoic guard. She trails her fingers over the padded shoulder of her brown jacket.

“This one is softer.”

“Because I broke it in,” she says, but she doesn’t demand I give it back. I lost everything the night of my commitment ceremony, and this one piece of clothing is the only thing that sort of feels like mine. The familiar weight has become a source of comfort for me. “It doesn’t look like you, you know.”

“What?”

“The portrait. They deified you.”

“They always paint my portrait like that—too serious and overly pretty. The other coven members used to rib me for it. I tore the illustrations out of my textbooks so I wouldn’t have to look at them.”

“I like the way you look in real life better,” she says, and her tongue clicks away from the roof of her mouth at the end of her sentence, launching her right into a new one. “It’s a good thing the resemblance isn’t too strong. Shouldn’t raise any suspicions while you’re dressed in plain clothes.”

We pass the crew kindling the fire for their supper, but Morgen doesn’t stop, leading me into the inn instead. It smells like roast beef and cabbage stew in here. My mouth waters.

“I’ll bring you some food. It’s been a long day, and you mentioned you’d like to lie down earlier.”

“Actually, I’d—”

She waves a hand toward our room, ushering me in. Looking over her shoulder before turning back to me, her expression turns cold again. “There’s something I must do. Stay in the room and get your rest while you can. The rough part of our journey begins tomorrow.”

She doesn’t leave space for an argument, turning the key in the lock and leaving me alone with my racing thoughts. The basin is still sitting on the dresser, so I lean over it, touching the cool water. I’m skimming the surface, setting it aglow when I hear two distinct voices speaking outside the door.

“Still here, Captain?” Harri asks.

My ears prick up. I thought she’d stomped off, but the oak door creaks like she’s pressing away from it. “Just making sure Snow doesn’t get any

ideas about following me around again.”

“Is something troubling you?” he asks. “Looks like you need to see Cassandra and get *that* off your mind.”

“I’m headed to visit her now, not that any of this is your concern.”

“The woman is what I’m concerned about though. We have to get rid of her.”

I lose control of my magic for a moment, panic slipping through my veins. The water ripples and splashes up the tin sides, but I calm it back to a flat state with a slow, deep breath.

“Get rid of her? That would negate all of the planning we’ve done. We’ll come out of this with dry coffers and nothing gained.”

“We need to cut our losses,” Harri says. “Queen Isobel will be testing the waters to start the war anew with this excuse. *The Ruined Soul* can always rebuild its wealth, but not if it’s blasted to bits by her navy.”

“It was a lover’s quarrel—Gwendolyn’s death wasn’t politically motivated. I doubt the queen would make such a move over something so trivial after everything. The woman stays on with us ‘til Gentrilly, and we’ll collect our coin.”

There’s a finality to the statement, but Harri continues, dropping his voice.

“We can still get something for her—there are other pirates here who will pay a handsome fee to have the luxury of keeping a noblewoman aboard. They can ransom her as they please after they get their money’s worth.”

I clap my hand over my mouth before my squeak of surprise can escape.

“Are you speaking of trafficking humans?” Venom drips from Morgen’s question. I don’t hear Harri’s reply. Maybe he hasn’t answered at all. I would stay silent too if Morgen spoke to me like that. “Good. The Countess of Nordersham liked to trade in human bodies, and look what happened to her. I’ll only accept payment from Snowdrop’s family. She stays with us, and if it bothers you so much, then you should seek employment with another crew.”

“Morgen, I’ve been with *The Ruined Soul* since —”

“Since my father took control as Captain, but it doesn’t give you the right to overstep my authority. Now, go back to camp and get out of my sight until we board.”

Footsteps retreat down the hall, and Morgen lets out a sigh that sounds more like a growl before she leaves too.

I purse my lips and blow my breath out over the water. The captain might not see me as anything more than a bag of gold, but I'm not going to be upset about it if it means she won't sell me off to some other pirates.

Although, I have a feeling that she wouldn't have handed me off anyways. She sounded vehemently opposed to Harri's idea. There's a sparkle of admiration polishing her image when I think of how she must have looked telling him off.

I splash my face, washing the thought away. I have a tendency to cling to people and the good I see in them. Not agreeing to sell me isn't exactly setting the bar very high. It doesn't mean she cares about me. But I feel safe with her, and that's no small thing to me.

I only wish there was a way I could help with the dangers the crew will be facing to get me back to Gentrilly. I scoop up a handful of water.

Maybe there is.

I can't fight an afanc or wield a sword, but if someone gets hurt, well then...I lift my hand, the water glowing transparently where it coats my skin.

My magic feels unsteady, ricocheting inside of me after days without steady use. I've never created a routine without Grimhilde's approval or guidance, but there's a way I can refocus and strengthen my power. I shiver listening to the boisterous sounds of festivities in the tavern—the joyful music and men shouting.

I only need a new memory to chase the one of Shiloh away so I can finish my climax without the thought of her. Surely someone out there will want to have some fun with me. I dry off my face and slip off Morgen's jacket, adjusting my laces to push up my breasts before I head out.

“It’s been too long since your last visit,” Cassandra says, resting her chin on her interlaced fingers. “I was sorry to be preoccupied with Captain Oskar last night when I saw you come in.”

“No worries about that, love,” I insist, taking in her fair beauty—her blue eyes and ash blonde hair played up by her powder blue gown and matching gloves that fit over her delicate arms. I’m equally repelled and compelled by her aesthetic. It’s an attraction I can keep a safe distance from. “I’m happy to see you tonight.”

I want to be in the mood for her. I need the release, to touch her and hold the heat of her in the palm of my hand, so I can stop thinking about what Snow might feel like there. I dreamt of her last night and woke up on the cold floor in the early morning light, relieved to have slept a full night without a nightmare before it sank in that the sweet dream was so much worse.

I can feel my grip slipping when I’m near Snow. When Harri suggested selling her off, I nearly lost it completely. I need to regain control before this feeling in my chest expands into anything bigger. Big feelings of any sort are dangerous for me.

“Do you want to talk or...” Cassandra glances over her shoulder, a coy smile curling her thin lips. She knows I don’t want to talk. She’s already reaching for my hand to lead me back to one of the private rooms.

Pulling back one of the scarlet curtains, she holds out her arm so I can roll down her silk glove, grazing my lips over her skin as I expose it. There’s never any kissing between us. She never touches me. No one does. Not anymore. But the velvet chaise looks inviting, and her body always

looks nice stretched out on it. I'm sure I'll get worked up properly once I have her there.

I spin her around, taking the lead to walk her back, but a spot of yellow catches my eye. The dress is like sunshine, a bright beam amongst the neutral colors at the table, and Gwen—*Snow* looks just as warm wearing it as she laughs and strokes the stubble on Captain Oskar's cheek. The pirate stares directly at her tits, his lust apparent when he licks his lips. His shirt is unbuttoned down to his mid-chest like he's ready to disrobe at any moment. They both look giddy. At ease with each other.

Jealousy rakes its claws down my ribs, appearing out of nowhere to make me ache for something I can't even let myself think about.

"What's wrong?" Cassandra asks, only using two fingers to touch my shoulder.

"It's someone from our ship. She's not supposed to be out here."

She turns to look. "Oh, her? She's been flirting with the captain for the past half hour, but don't worry. He's harmless, really."

Maybe so, but Snow's not. Not with the secrets she's guarding.

"Thank you for your time, Cassandra, but I need to deal with this." I place a small purse of coins in her palm. She jiggles it.

"It's heavy."

"You deserve it, love. Put it toward opening your own inn like you've been talking about," I tell her, striding away. It's a clean break. A fair sum for the comfort she's provided me through the years. I don't mention that the next time *The Ruined Soul* comes to this port, I won't be with them. I won't even be me.

My eyes are set on Snow, her mouth moving as she tells some story. What could she possibly be telling him? Oskar brushes something from her lips, and my stomach squeezes. If she lets something slip, we're all dead. I should interrupt, but I'm afraid of what *I* might let slip if I get too close to her. She just needs someone to keep an eye on her. I'll pull her away at the first sign of any distress or commotion.

I lean against the bar, rolling a coin to the tavern keeper when he slides a mug my way.

Finally, Snow lifts her gaze from the pirate, and her eyes land on me, her head bobbing over the clusters of people gathered at the long wooden tables. She holds her hand up, blocking one of the sugared grapes Oskar is

trying to feed her. She whispers something to him without looking away from me and slips out of her seat.

I clutch my mug and consider going back to the room before she can reach me, but I can't leave her here on her own.

"That was quick," she says, sliding onto a barstool that's a touch too close to me. Her lips are extra red and shining with flakes of sugar crystals.

"What was?" I realize that *I'm* staring at her tits now and turn to count the knife marks tallied into the sticky bar instead.

"The thing you had to do." She smiles knowingly and swirls a finger in the direction of the private rooms. I take a huge gulp of my drink.

"It was hard to manage with you running around the place after I told you to stay in the room."

"That sounded like a suggestion, not an order." Snow crosses her arms, refusing to back down. She sits on the very edge of the stool, erasing any lines of personal space between us.

"I need to speak with you," I grit out. "Privately."

She raises her eyebrows and waves to Captain Oskar who's obviously craning his neck to get a look at her ass. "Fine."

I take her down the wide hall to find a room that doesn't have a red feather chain hanging from the post outside. Parting the velvet curtain, I follow her into the small space that's mostly filled by the emerald chaise.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" she asks, turning to face me. I step closer, backing her up against the dark wood-paneled wall. Her eyes go wide, the candlelight flicking specks of gold across the brown. I decide not to beat around the bush.

"What are you doing with Captain Oskar? For someone who's supposedly terrified of pirates, you sure seemed cozy with that one."

"He's not a pirate," she says, her voice thin and strained. "He's a privateer."

"Was a privateer," I correct her. "He lost his commission eight years ago."

"Then he lied to me." She worries at her lower lip, thinking. "It's not like there are many others to choose from here. He seemed kind enough. And handsome."

The statement sends up red flags in my mind. I lean forward, pressing my hands to the wall just above her shoulders, effectively pinning her to

the spot.

“If you were flirting with him to see if you could get a better offer, then I need to know exactly what you told him. For the safety of my crew.”

A deep rosy hue sweeps across the bridge of her nose, highlighting her constellation of freckles.

“I—” Her mouth shuts tight. “I have no wish to seek safe passage from anyone else. I trust you.” The statement knocks the wind out of me. I should stalk off now, clear it from my mind and let her carry on as long as she promises to be careful. But I’m locked in place, waiting for her next words. “It’s just that...I thought he could help me with my magic.”

I scrunch up my face. “How in the underworld can he help you with your magic? Did he tell you he was a witch as well as a privateer?”

“No.”

“Then what? Because telling him about your abilities is almost as dangerous as telling him who you are. If you’re trying to find a way to trick us...”

“It’s not like that.”

“There are pirates who specifically traffic humans with fae blood, and if he saw what I saw that night...”

“I didn’t tell him anything,” she whisper-shouts, cutting off my escalating lecture. “It’s just that I know what kind of danger the crew will have to face because of me, and I want to help.”

“With your magic?”

She nods stiffly. The answer on the tip of my tongue is *no*, but healers are hard to come by. We need someone who knows how to treat wounds and ailments, especially with the course we’re taking. She could be helpful.

“And what does Oskar have to do with it?” I ask.

“I only need him to boost my power, to amplify and hone it to my will.” She refuses to meet my eyes.

“I don’t understand.”

Her lips part, her chin dropping low before she flutters her lashes back up to look at me. I must be mistaken. I must be going mad for real this time because I think there’s a glimmer of heat in her stare.

“There are many ways to enhance magical intentions—it can be done with rituals, blood, sacrifices, and...” She takes a deep breath, the tops of her breasts swelling beneath her neckline. “Pleasure.”

"I thought the Moon Coven servants were a virginal lot, devoted to the moon."

"Who's the naive one now?" she giggles, breaking some of the tension. "You're thinking of the Devouring Tree Coven. We devote ourselves to the moon *with* each other, beneath her divine light."

I swallow, shuddering as heat coils through me at the thought of Snow on the beach dancing beneath the moonlight.

"And you think *he* can do the job for you?" My throat is hoarse.

"What's wrong with him?"

"Have you seen how he licks the salt off his glass?" I stick the tip of my tongue between my lips. "He's like a kitten drinking milk."

She snorts out a laugh. "And you think you can do better than that?"

"I know I can." I want to scoop the words back into my mouth, but they're already thickening the air in this room where it's only me and her. The rise and fall of her chest quickens, and my exhalations come in sharp pants.

"You seemed quite enamored with that fragile beauty before," she says, arching her back. "Too bad I'm not suited to your tastes,"

I growl low in my throat. "You're too well-suited to my tastes, and that's exactly the problem."

"Now *I* don't understand," she says, holding the collar of my jacket in a loose fist. Our faces are mere inches apart. I can smell the floral soap on her skin, the sugary sweetness on her breath. She rises on her toes, putting our mouths on a dangerous collision course.

"I can't—" *Get too close to anyone or I risk losing my soul, the very essence of who I am.* I try to form the words. I really do. But the damn curse catches them in my throat before they can form. "I can't explain."

I jerk my head back, but she doesn't move.

Snow braces for a challenge, her intention set on me for some unfathomable reason. Her eyes are heavy-lidded. Hot molten gold. I want to run my tongue across her lips, damn the curse, damn it all for a taste of her.

Those eyes.

That mouth.

It's all too much.

"Turn around," I breathe, and she shivers when I trail my hand over her cheek and the slope of her shoulder, all the way down to her wrist. She

listens, and I press her palms flat against the wall, leaning up against her. “Can you promise you’ll be discreet with any magic you do on my boat?”

“Yes.”

“And are you sure it’s ok if I touch you?”

“Goddess. Yes.”

I bring my hand down to her gown, brushing over the soft wool of her skirt. If I’m stepping this close to the edge, I might as well relish in the heart-pounding excitement of staring into the beautiful abyss below.

Her body responds eagerly to my touch, and I take my time, tracing the pattern of every curve and its accompanying valley—sweeping my fingertips lightly over her waist and hips before working them around to her inner thighs.

She sways her hips when I reach her mound, but I keep stroking her through the fabric, not applying too much pressure even though she tries to grind herself into my hand.

“You are so needy for this, aren’t you?” I keep my voice even like I’m still in full control of this situation, but I’m dying to see if she’s as wet as I am.

“I am.” She wiggles, pressing her ass against me. I push my hips into her and inch up her gown.

“Mmm.” I bury my face in her thick brown hair, nuzzling her neck as I push aside the thin knickers to find her sweet folds, brushing my knuckles gently over her pussy. I slip across the slick wet surface with ease, sliding over smooth, bare skin.

“Snow?”

“Yes?” She steps her feet wider, inviting me to splay her open, but I’m caught on one detail.

“Why are you so slippery?”

“Oh, that,” she laughs breathily. “The servant blues take turns spreading sugar wax on each other to remove the hair. My friends did mine the day I ran away.” She crooks her neck over her shoulder, nearly meeting my lips. “Why so shocked? I thought pirate captains were a rakish, scandalous lot.”

She bites down on a mischievous smile, and my pulse settles low between my legs in a heavy, pounding beat. What kind of fucking coven did she belong to? Hot curiosity streaks through me, and I part her folds, teasing over them, then around her clit and her wet slit.

I make a pattern, feeling her swell in my hand as I build the pressure. I wait until her breath hitches and she makes cute gasping noises when I flutter past her clit before I finally press down.

She spreads her fingers wide on the wall, moaning my name. She's rocking her body to keep pace with my hand. I bring my left hand to her hip, bracing her in one place.

"Please," she begs.

"Not yet," I say, and rub her clit with just enough pressure to bring her to the edge without pushing her off, then I slip a finger into her wet cunt. She clenches around me, her walls already fluttering with the threat of an orgasm.

Gods, what I wouldn't give to taste her there. To kiss her right on the spot and have her do the same to me with those plush lips.

The thought startles me.

I can't want that.

Her lower abdomen clenches against my forearm, and I can feel the string of pleasure pulling taut enough to snap at any moment.

"Morgen," she pants.

It's too much. If I feel her release, I'll dream about it. I'll want more.

I draw my fingers out, and she lets out a stunned cry.

"What—why did you stop?"

I don't answer. I can't.

She smoothes her skirt, her mouth hanging open when she faces me. I try not to let her see how heavily I'm breathing.

I plaster on my cockiest grin.

"Oh *you*," she starts, her face pink with arousal and frustration. "That was mean."

I hook my thumbs into my belt, ignoring my soaked fingers and my own damn frustration. It was mean. I'll give her that. But I have a way to make it up to her without playing so dangerously.

"If you want to finish, then you'll go back to the room like I told you to and wait for me with your fingers in your pussy."

She scoffs incredulously. "And what if I don't want to finish with you anymore?"

I shrug and reach for the curtain, wagging my tongue like a kitten. "I suppose you could ask Captain Oskar to do his best."

My resistance is too weak. I stride out before she can call me back. I burst out of the tavern's back entrance. I can't be in the same building as her right now.

No one else roams the shadowy side of the dunes, so I walk alone, letting the cool air sweep away my desire to press her back up against the wall and look into those warm eyes while she rides my hand.

IO

GWEN

I cling to the curtain, waiting for the right time to leave. The laughter in the tavern feels directed at me. As if every person in here knows exactly what just happened in this room.

Shame hangs around my neck like a heavy, painted sign. Not because I was lifting my skirts for the captain, but because of the way she played me. I'm burning with the need to finish. I fear I have become a walking torch for Morgen, my struggle visible to anyone who sees me.

I stomp out to the bar, my thighs rubbing together with the damp reminder of Morgen's touch. She's not leaning over a stool or seated at the bench where several lovely people are vying for Skye's attention. Skye doesn't see me watching them; they're as transfixed as I am by the woman perched on their lap, running her fingers through their silvery blond hair.

"Coming back to finish what we started?"

There's only one person I want to ask me that question right now, and it's not Captain Oskar with his whiskey-laced breath and hairy knuckles. A gold tooth flashes in his smile when he lowers his glass.

"No, sorry, have to get back to my room," I mumble, shouldering past him. He steps in front of me, deliberately blocking my path. I glance up at him. The dark coat of stubble on his throat looks scratchier than it did a half hour ago. The look in his eyes seems less charming.

"Why the rush? I saw your captain storming out of here. I don't think she'd mind if you took a little bit of time for yourself, and if she comes back, I don't mind sharing with the both of—"

"She'd cut your tongue out if she heard you speaking to her like that," Jacques cautions, squeezing between two tables to get to us. Oskar cocks

his head to the side as if my guard is nothing but a slight annoyance.

Morgen's rival laughs. "She's not here."

"But I am," Jacques says. Beads of sweat glisten on his hairline, but he stands prepared for a fight with his knees bent and hand on his sword hilt. I can almost see what kind of knight he was years ago. A hush falls over the nearby tables.

The pirate's eyes darken and he lifts a hand.

"I'm looking for some fun, not a fight with the sea witch's wench," he says. The insult is obvious even if I don't know what he's implying. Jacques scowls like he's thinking about drawing his sword anyways, but turns to me, and I'm relieved to see he's letting it go. He might have been a soldier once, but he's quite soft now and the pirate towers over him.

"I'll see you back now," he says gruffly.

The noise starts up again once the crowd realizes there won't be a fight.

"I didn't see you there," I tell him when we reach the hall. "Thank you for stepping in for me."

"Captain did tell me to keep an eye on you." He dabs his forehead with a handkerchief. "Lost sight of you after you left the private rooms for a minute, though." I suck air into my cheeks and hold it there. I can't get back to the room and shove my head under the pillow fast enough.

"We weren't doing anything," I say. "Just...talking."

His eyebrows shoot up, but he drops his gaze to the floor.

"That is none of my business." He picks his head up and turns the key in the lock, pausing for a second when he cracks the door open. "But if anyone at all ever tries to hurt you, tell me and I'll do my best to protect you. I'll be right out in the hall until the captain returns." He doesn't tell me where she went. I don't ask.

But before he leaves, he says, "Don't tell her I lost you in the crowd, eh?"

I smile back at him. "Of course not, Jacques."

I throw myself onto the bed and press my face into the pillow.

You're too well-suited to my tastes.

I've always pushed myself and done my best for others because I love to see them light up with approval for me. I crave praise, and hearing those words from Morgen flooded my body with an instant dose of pleasure.

The timing of her exit makes me feel the same way I did whenever Grimhilde gushed over my abilities and then turned around to forbid me from participating in certain rituals—ready to jump out of my skin.

I huff and turn onto my back. Morgen told me to wait up for her, but I'm determined to fall asleep by the time she gets here. I won't stay up and humiliate myself further by touching myself.

The ache between my legs persists, making sleep impossible.

I stroke my inner thighs lightly, vowing to stop once I hear footsteps. I cannot give her the satisfaction of knowing I'm thinking about her while I part myself and start to tease my clit.

I will not.

But I don't move my hand when I hear the slow stride of her boots down the hall. Nor do I stop myself from wriggling my dress up higher so she'll see me with my thighs spread just as she requested. All for a chance to hear her tell me how much she likes what she sees.

There's a quiet exchange of words outside, then a slice of light fills the room before the darkness swallows Morgen again. Her heels click against the hardwood, and my fingers tremble over my pussy.

I'm losing my courage, trying to slide my hand away and close my legs before she notices, but she takes the seat across from me.

Morgen's figure is bathed in the bonfire's glow where it seeps through the window. It hits the sharp angles of her jaw and shoulder, the twisted lines of her legs where they're crossed in the chair. The shadows dance beneath her eyes, and although she doesn't smile, I can tell she's watching me with anticipation.

"Such a lovely sight," she purrs, tapping her nails on the armrests. "But I distinctly remember telling you to wait for me with your fingers in your pussy."

"I—" I drop my finger down over my entrance, flustered, but unnerved by the brazenness of the act.

"Go ahead," she says. Her eyes are two blue flames on my slit. "Show me how a precious snow white gets herself off." She uncrosses her legs and leans forward, her body close to the bottom of the bed, so I'm on display for her. "I've been thinking about how you'd do it since I walked in on you that night."

I plunge a finger into myself with a gasp.

"You knew what I was doing?"

“I suspected,” she says. “And now you’ve confirmed it for me. Tell me, Snow. Did you go back and finish yourself after?”

“No.” I still my hand although I want more. I’ve never felt so naked in my life. She’s coaxing me into exposing more than just my body to her.

“Why not?”

“I was frustrated,” I admit. “My thoughts kept bouncing between you and the guard.”

“The guard?” She sits back and grips the armrests again. “I thought the information from Lavinsar was all a farce. Are you telling me that there’s some truth to what they said—that the guard who tried to kill you was your lover?”

“Yes, we had planned to meet up. I thought we were going to... you know.” My free hand touches my throat. “But she had been ordered to...”

“Then you will forget her,” she growls, the shadows on her face deepening. I hear her knuckles pop. “Anyone who resorts to such a trick isn’t worthy of your headspace. This time when you come, it will only be for me. Now put both of your hands between your legs and show me exactly what you were going to do to yourself beneath my jacket.”

I bend my knees and drop them open, coasting my hand over my tit as I make my way back down to my folds. I part them and circle my index finger over my clit while I work two fingers into myself.

“That’s a good girl.” The words hit a spot within me that my fingers will never be able to reach.

“Wouldn’t it feel nice if I slid my fingers into you while I took yours?” I ask, tightening my circles while I start to thrust inside myself. I know I’m setting myself up for rejection, but I have so many ideas.

“It would feel *too* nice. Right now I can’t imagine anything sexier than watching you.” Her foot hits the floor like she’s considering moving to the bed. “I love seeing that pretty pussy shine, knowing it’s because you want me touching you there.”

“Goddess. I do,” I groan, betraying myself before this arrogant demon in the night.

“Then pretend it’s me pushing my fingers into you and circling your pearl.”

My shame unravels. I rock my hips along with my hands, soaking my fingers in my wetness, not caring that she’s watching. But it’s more than not caring. I’m enjoying her eyes on me and how the pace of her breath

quickens. I'm buzzing from her attention while I toy with myself, my whole body tightening when I hear her squirm in her seat because I know I'm not imagining this—she's hot from watching.

I turn my head to the side, slowing my strokes to mimic hers as my clit pulses with a warning that my orgasm is closing in.

"That's it," she says. Her voice is sultry and full of smoke. "That's exactly how I would touch you to make you quiver and come in the palm of my hand." I curl my toes into the mattress, her words and the image triggering my climax so intensely that I start to pull away. "Keep going." She rises to her feet. "Work yourself until the very end."

I make a strangled sound, moving my fingers as the sensation bursts through me. My magic shines brighter with each wave of pleasure. It's the most connected I've felt to my body in a while, possibly ever. I'm aware of the thrumming of power in my veins and the secrets I can unlock within myself as I work my way back down from the incredible high.

I sink into the pillow to savor my blissed-out state. My eyes are too heavy to open, but I'm tempted to look when Morgen asks quietly, "Are you asleep?"

I'm too tired to respond immediately.

Through the filter of my eyelashes, I watch as Morgen turns her back to me. My lower body tingles. If she thinks up something else to do, I might just wake up enough to make it happen. She starts to undress, but she doesn't touch herself with the same care she showed me. She only unwraps her bandages, revealing patches of shimmery green tattoos along her shoulders and torso.

I start to ask her about them, but she swivels her head around, checking to see if I'm looking and I feign sleep. There's something tense and rushed about the way she's wiping the patterns off with a damp cloth before rewrapping them. It seems like a bad time for questions, so I lie as still as I can, not opening my eyes again until I hear her sigh.

She's dressed in a tunic and yawning like she's ready for bed, but she doesn't climb in next to me.

She lies on the floor with her knife in her hand. Is that where she slept last night too? I shiver thinking of the cold hardwood floors.

When I hear her breath thicken with sleep, I roll to the side of the bed, tossing one of the blankets over her. I wrap myself up in the other one. If

she wants to be stubborn about a perfectly good bed, then fine, but I fall asleep a little easier knowing she won't be freezing down there.



“MY LADY.”

The morning is grey, and pulling myself from a deep sleep is hard. I lift my head from the thick padding of my blanket cocoon to find Jacques standing in the doorway.

“Good morning,” I say, rubbing my eyes.

“Captain sent me to bring you back to the boat.” Jacques clears his throat and looks away. I realize too late that my gown is jumbled up near my thighs. I fix myself and make the bed, knowing I was anything but quiet last night. I chatter away to fill the silence, not letting the awkwardness set in when Jacques barely responds. I don't have much to pack or prepare before we board again, so there's not much to keep myself busy with.

“I suppose the captain has lots to do this morning,” I ramble on. I don't want to sound too eager, but I'm curious about where she is and what she's doing. The excitement of a new attraction is flooding my senses. Perhaps she'll ask me to join her in her cabin, and we can discuss pirate things and magic, and maybe she'll even command me to do more wicked things in the night. Now this leg of the journey doesn't seem so scary—or lonely.

“Yes. She's overseeing everything.”

Jacques' face is tighter than usual. His general sunny countenance is clouded when he takes my single bag. He's normally all smiles and casual banter.

“Did I do something to upset you?” I ask him. The beach looks bare without the tents. The crew carries packs stuffed with poles on their backs.

“No, my lady.” Jacques stares at the horizon. Soon the line of dark waves will be our only view. “It's setting in that we're leaving the comforts of the port behind. The crew is irritable. The captain is in a particularly foul mood.”

Well, she did insist on sleeping on the floor last night, and our act was one-sided. I would be cranky too. I grip my elbows, bracing myself against the brisk air. Autumns in Lavinsar always come in so gradually that I

hardly feel the shift to wintertime. I'm not accustomed to sudden drops in the temperature. I'm sure I can convince the captain to share a bed with me now that I've caught her eye. I'd enjoy her company, and I think I can make it worth her time too.

I try not to smile at the plot brewing in my mind as I board the ship because the tension is palpable.

"I need help lifting the fucking crate," a seaman calls through his grubby cupped hands.

Sampson kisses Griff before he ascends the crow's nest. I crane my neck, my stomach dropping as I watch him climb closer to the opaque stretch of clouds above us.

"Why's she gawking about on the deck?" Morgen asks, lowering a ledger. Her face is pinched and her clothes are rumpled. The gloomy sky makes her hair look more silver than it did last night, as though she aged while I slept. "I told you to put her in her cabin so she wouldn't get in the way of loading the ship."

"Sorry, Captain," Jacques says.

"I'm right here." I pop my arm out of its loop around Jacques'. "You can speak directly to me."

Morgen rolls the ledger up and crosses her arms over her chest. "I don't have time for this. Jacques, you will take her to her room as I instructed, and make sure to schedule your walks when she will not be in the way."

"But what about my m—"

She shoots me a look that cuts off my careless question about my magic. I bite my lips together. Turning on her heel, she calls out an order to a man in a stained apron, seemingly brushing off the huge mistake I was about to make without another thought.

My fantasies of softening her dissolve as I watch the set of her shoulders and the snapping of her fingers. She must be built from the permafrost of Corstyli's mountains if the heat of last night did nothing to thaw her.

"Snowdrop." Jacques tugs on my arm when I don't respond to the name. "Let's get you to the cabin."

"You weren't kidding about the foul mood."

"She gets like that often, but she's been worse lately," he says, his watery eyes full of sympathy. "Don't trouble yourself over it. I'm sure

your family will have you wed soon, and your spouse will cherish you as they should. Ladies aren't meant for captains of pirate ships and bawdy taverns."

Ah. So he definitely heard us last night. My face flushes, and as much as I don't want to be cooped up in the small cabin again, I'm grateful to hide away and lick my wounds without anyone seeing my disappointment.

He leaves me with a promise to return with tea and scurries off when Cook calls for him. I press my back against the wall, sliding down into my cot. Jacques has a point; most nobles are usually wed by my age. My sister's suitors are a hot topic for gossip even in Lavinsar, and she's two years younger than me. My commitment to the Moon Coven meant I never had to worry about negotiations over my hand in marriage, but now that the tie is broken, it's something I should consider.

Sharing a home with someone promised to me holds a certain appeal. I could be happy knowing someone was looking forward to seeing me at the end of each day, ready to eat supper and wind down in bed together.

If I'm lucky, I might find a love match. I glance at the cabin's small, grimy mirror, trying to think of how I would look in a wedding epitaph, but my reflection is peaked and blotchy from the cold. It reminds me of another time, another reflection in a mirror carved from obsidian in a tower far away.

You'll only ever have me.

My heart sinks. Grimhilde warned me about dreaming of such things, and here I am with my head in the clouds and love on my brain when I don't even know how my mother will react when she finds out I'm alive.

I shouldn't miss the High Priestess and her reassurances, but I do. She would tell me to be reasonable, so I try to think of marriage in terms of a contract. Love is a rare enough thing, and I've treated enough village women with broken bones and bruises to know that cruelty can hide in any union. That's what I should be worried about—not how my spouse's mouth will feel against mine in the deep hours of the night, or if they'll coax the same passion from me that Morgen did last night.

I press my fingers to my lips. She never even kissed me, but I feel like I already know her taste. There I go getting ahead of myself again. I sit on my hands so I won't touch myself out of boredom or spite. I'm still angry about Morgen's complete turnaround. Why would I want a passion like hers when it always leads to cold stares and locked doors?

All I can hope for is a nice welcome from my mother and a safe home to live in. I can stuff my magic deep within and find contentment behind my new walls where I'll never hurt anyone.

It will be an incredibly dull life without the wild magic of sex and nature all around me, but I will get to live, and I should be grateful for this chance. I rest my head against the wall. There is nothing to do and fresh waves of magic ripple beneath my skin. I sit tight, letting the weight of my body dampen the urge to give it some menial task for relief.

I should get used to this ennui if I want to be accepted at court. I throw my prayers up to the sleeping moon. I may never know true love or achieve the status of a priestess, but she can still hold my heart and all the secrets I keep inside.

When the door opens, I'm not disappointed for once when it's not Morgen coming to check on me. I won't let myself hold onto that thread of excitement after she cut it so callously. Instead, I smile weakly at the cabin boy, Rhys.

"Cook had me bring your food. He's got Jacques on an errand," he says.

There's a tray stacked on top of the large white bowl he's holding. I shake out my numb hands and help him move the plate of biscuits to the table so he can lower the bowl.

"Thank you," I tell him.

"Yer welcome." He puckers his mouth and takes an envelope from his pocket. I run my thumb over the M on the wax seal. "It's from Captain."

I sit at the table, practically tearing it open although I've squished all of my hopes down.

For practice. Just in case. -M

I wave my hands over the bowl of water and smile. It's not an apology, but I don't need one. With something to put my mind to, it'll be easier to pass the time without thinking of her flaming figure in the night. Even if I have to keep it a secret, it'll always be mine.

GWEN

For days I experiment with bowls of water, scooping it up with my hands until I can think of new ways to use it since there is no one to tell me what to do. I track the cycle of the moon and hold my own ceremonies, keeping my learning as fluid as the water itself.

When I was a little girl, I used to collect twigs and acorns and fashion them into dolls that I would hide in the pockets of my servant blues. My friends and I would sneak them beneath our bunks, giggling and shushing each other if we heard one of the dormitory matrons coming.

Designing my own magic regimen feels similar. It's another secret to guard, an exercise that the High Priestess would forbid because it wasn't her idea.

It's a nice distraction from the pirate captain who's all too good at pretending I don't exist. I don't let myself fight for her attention when she doesn't want to give it. She turns her nose up the few times I cross her path, but I think about what's waiting in the cabin and breeze right past her without letting the hurt settle in. She probably doesn't glance my way, but I don't look back to make sure.

I delight in testing my limits; I work on my precision by forming shapes and seeing how high I can float them while maintaining enough control to plunk them back into the container without a sound. With a burst of concentrated effort, I can make a small geyser erupt in my teacup. Today I'm practicing with fountains that spout up in time with the song I sing to the water.

Grimhilde used to push me like this with tests she hand-picked for me.

“I know you can do better than that.” Her mouth was always a slash of scarlet paint beneath the shadow of her hood. I seldom saw the look in her eyes as I crouched over her bubbling cauldron or stood before her scrying mirror. *“There’s no need to hold back when you’re in the tower with me.”*

And so I went against that little whisper that told me to keep that piece of myself private. All because I wanted to impress my High Priestess, for her to think I was special, the whole time not knowing that she was only trying to gauge my potential for destruction.

The bowl begins to shake on the table, its contents rising along with my anxiety until water runs over the sides. My voice cracks on the chorus.

She knew I would become something awful. She must have seen it in me before the mirror told her. The bowl clatters around. I was full of pride and vanity, but she was aware that my gifts were too much for a girl who was never meant to be anything.

A hairline crack threads the porcelain rim.

Her promise that I would become a priestess was only a sweet little lie for me to hold onto while she coaxed the horrible thing inside me to show itself. It’s making its presence known in this cabin while my magic threatens to break.

It scares me. I don’t want to break things and be terrible just because I’m upset. If I can’t prove Grimhilde wrong, then I should’ve stayed and faced her judgment.

I flex my fingers over the water’s surface, trying to think of anything but the woman who swore she loved me like a daughter. Beads of moisture gather around my fingers, the touch as light as Morgen’s when she traced my hand.

The kind of magic that heals and shines light where it’s needed most.

Morgen sees the potential for good in my magic. She’s not fond of me. She doesn’t have any formal training in magic. But she’s no fool. She saw my raw abilities and decided they could benefit her. Otherwise, she’d never let me experiment on her ship. That means something.

I can heal. I can bring light.

That can be my purpose now that I’ve lost the one I’ve clung to for so long.

The water glows around my fingertips, swirling as I cup my palm to hold the floating ball of blue light. I let it roll into my cup without it

touching my skin. I have to finish up my playtime before Jacques arrives for our walk.

Like clockwork, my stomach growls just as I tell him to come in.

"I made this for you. It's good for gout." I trade a poultice for a stale biscuit and salted meat.

"Thank you, my lady, but you're too kind. I'm sure your folks won't be pleased to hear you're working so hard on someone like me."

I wave his concerns away. "They shouldn't mind when it's no trouble at all." The poultice is infused with just enough magic to ease his pain without raising suspicions. "It's only a blend of herbs pressed between some linen, but I hope it helps."

I take a big bite of the biscuit to stop myself from over-explaining and choke down the dry crumbs. The air pressure is noticeably low today, and there's a nervous energy around the crew on deck as they race to tug on the ropes running up the masts.

"It looks like rain."

"Aye. It came out of nowhere. We've got to batten down the hatches," Jacques says. We stop to let two men carry a long wooden box in front of us. "We can't keep you out here for long today."

"I understand."

Turbulence rolls off the water, warning of danger although the wind is hardly stirring. There's a violent undercurrent ripping beneath the stillness of the dark blue sea.

Morgen is standing at the stern, her shoulders are loose but the crown of her head is high as she speaks with Harri. She's facing away from me, looking way out into the horizon where the sea and the sky seem like they've been scrubbed together. I let my eyes linger on her figure as we move closer, stealing glimpses of her impeccable posture.

"A pigeon brought word from the sloop near Sarteal's borders. If there's any whiff of conflict between Queen Isobel and the High Priestess, the nightmare realm will be the first to act out," Harri says.

Morgen taps her swordhilt. It's the only sign of her impatience.

"There's much to be done today, Harri. Oversee the quarters and make sure things are squared away for the storm. That is your job. Messages are to come straight to me."

She steps away so quickly I don't have time to look away. Our eyes lock for the first time since Seshly. Morgen swallows visibly.

“Jacques,” she calls out, but I won’t let her scold my companion for allowing me to exist in front of her.

“I’m ready to go back to my cabin now. The sea is making me ill today,” I say, tugging on his arm before any of her insults can land. I flip my hair back to show her how unbothered I am by her, keeping my eyes upward the entire walk back to my room.

“The rain is going to start soon. Can’t have too many loose objects in here.” Jacques takes away my food tray and stacks the water bowl on top. He smiles, but his face is etched with concern. “I won’t be able to make my normal rounds until the storm passes by, but stay put and keep the lantern off. You’ll be fine.”

People shout outside, heavy footsteps racing along the wood boards. Panic has set in, and it's contagious.

I curl up on my cot when Jacques leaves, wishing I had my water source to keep me grounded. My nerves fray as thunderclouds break and the boat begins to rock.

Anytime I try to sleep, my stomach rolls up to my throat with the frantic movement. It’s far too dark in here without the lantern burning.

“Let the moon rock the tide. Goddess, hold me in your soft light,” I whisper and run my hands down the wall like I can soothe the ocean. My prayers become a lullaby that carries me through the worst of it, and I shut my eyes, remembering the moonlight shines even when I cannot see it.

I fall into a liquid space between dreaming and awake, letting the storm toss me about. Torrents of rain pummel the boat. Unsecured items roll around and knock together on the main deck, the noise so loud that I don’t notice the knocking at first.

But the striking persists. I sit up, startled by the realization. My brain is foggy from too much rest, and it takes me several dizzying seconds to lower myself from the cot. No one has announced themselves, but the banging continues.

“One moment,” I call. I hold onto the table until I gain my balance, barely taking baby steps away from it when the door flies open, creaking on its hinges with a gust of wind. A shadow too tall to be Jacques fills the frame, accompanied by someone much leaner.

“My lady.” I recognize Harri’s gruff voice before Rhys lifts a small lantern, lighting the raindrops falling from the quartermaster’s tricornered

hat and his own shiny face. "The storm is too rough. We need to move you somewhere safer."

"Jacques said this was the safest place for me," I say, not wanting to move out into the rain when I can feel the violent energy of the waves.

"Jacques can't find his ass with both hands," Harri says, his voice low and his body unshaken by the motion of the boat. "You're coming with us. Rhys, grab her and keep her on her feet."

"Aye."

The cabin boy sets the lantern down and grabs me by the shoulders with too much force. I tense up from the rough handling.

"Where are we going?" The question is blown away by the whipping wind. They don't answer. I'm soaked in a matter of seconds, rain shooting at me from all directions. It sprays my bodice and pours down on my head. The two men guide me toward the rail on the starboard side. A wave rises up like a black wall against the grey sky.

My stomach flops over. It's too close. Panic swells inside me. I wriggle in Rhys' grip, resisting his hold.

"Where are you taking me?" I cry. I throw my body back, knocking my skull against Rhys' mouth, bucking wildly because they're ignoring me. I connect with something hard. My head spins from the blunt jab of pain.

"Fuck!" Rhys yells.

Harri spins around, bracing me to his chest as steaming dark liquid gushes over Rhys' fingers. "Shut up, boy. They'll hear us."

"Bitch broke my nose."

"I don't care. Keep it down."

Harri is stronger than Rhys. He practically drags me off my feet, marching me closer to the edge. I flail, but my limbs are pinned back to my sides.

"It's not personal, Princess," Harri growls in my ear when I try to kick back into his shin. My heart rams against my chest, and I go limp. "Yes, I know who you are. It's not so easy to fool me. I'm sure the captain will be quite sad that you chose to go wandering and fell overboard tonight, but it'll be for the best. Our crew will be safer without you. The bloody world will be safer without you. We can't have your mother and the High Priestess tearing everything apart again all because Morgen saw a silly, pretty creature and couldn't let her die."

His words are salt in a wound. Even in the face of the ocean's gaping maw, they sting. I think of the pamphlets littering the streets of Seshly, the news of my death. This loss won't matter. I'm meant to be dead. Everyone is mourning the would-be princess with a moon for a crown already.

A scream dies in my throat as cold rain fills my mouth. I swallow it down. At least I will be surrounded by water in the end. I may never speak my truth, but the ocean will know it anyway.

A familiar pulse stirs up beneath my skin, in tune with the violent tide. It's a deep drumming within my blood that responds to a call coming from beneath the sea.

I throw my arms back, not surrendering, but offering myself to the waves. Harri gasps when he sees my limbs sparkling where the raindrops hit my skin.

"What the devil are you doing?" he barks, losing control. I'm dragging him to the rail with me. "Stop that."

He's fumbling, trying to wrench my body into a manageable shape so he can toss me over, but a metallic blast rings through the night, and he stops fumbling over me.

Harri twists me with him so we're both facing Morgen. Flashes of lighting make her features temporarily visible—the dark hair plastered to her head, the mad grin on her face, the sharp cut of her eyes and jaw. There's the jacket hanging from her wiry frame and the flintlock pistol in her hand with rain running down the brass barrel.

More pirates climb onto the deck, bracing themselves against the wind. Rhys tries to blend in with their shadows.

"Take your fucking hands off the princess," Morgen growls.

Harri hesitates and pulls me closer like a shield. "So you know, then. I tried to give you the benefit of doubt, but you know."

"Of course I know. Why do you think I brought her along? Who would pay a higher price for their daughter than a queen?"

"You're a fool for this, Morgen," Harri yells. Murmurs carry through the deck. "You'll start a war or get us all killed."

"I don't give a fuck about a war. War means money, and no one is going to stop us from claiming our riches." She creeps closer, placing the pistol back in its holster. "I knew I smelled fuckery back in Seshly. Give me the princess, and we'll sort this out the right way."

I'm shoved toward Morgen. She catches me and wraps me beneath her arm, pressing me to her soaked blouse. Her skin radiates heat that vanishes when she lets me go and steps forward, reaching for her sword.

"If you want to be Captain and decide what to do with the boat, then make your claim," she says.

"I don't want to do this, Mor, but you're looking for a fight."

Another crack of lighting glints on the steel edge of her sword.

"No, you started this one, you ungrateful mutinous bastard. If you're going to make your claim, make it now."

There's a scrape of metal as he unsheathes his weapon.

"Then I'm ready to challenge your role as Captain, you sick patricidal wench."

I'm jerked back by a wave. I hear a clash of steel as I'm caught by two strong arms.

"Probably best if you don't go flopping over the side like a fish in case she wins," Skye says, steadying me.

"What if she loses?"

They shrug. "Then farewell, little fish."

"Can't you help her?" I hiss, thinking of Harri's size and muscle mass. Skye is built more comparably.

"No one would respect her as their leader if I did."

Jacques comes barreling toward me in his nightshirt, his sword drawn. He skids in on his knees.

"Princess," he breathes, kneeling before me.

"I'm not—"

"I'll protect you no matter what happens. I would die for you."

"Get up." Skye's pale lashes shake with an eye roll. "You nearly stabbed her."

Jacques' grip on the sword is clumsy, but the burden on my heart lifts a bit knowing I'm not alone. He takes a fighting stance in front of me, and I watch the chaotic blur of Morgen and Harri's bodies over his shoulder.

Harri doesn't have much height on Morgen, but he's all muscle and hard knuckles wrapped around his blade. His movements remind me of Shiloh's—full of blunt force and killing blows, but Morgen dodges them with a liquid grace that I've never seen before.

She flows with the motion of the boat, stepping quickly to match a drawdown before using the swell of a wave to propel her body as she races

toward the stern to strike out at Harri. He holds his balance with his strength, but she glides along with every tilt.

It's a dance, and she knows the steps, but I'm filled with fear when his blade misses her neck and hits a wood beam, splintering it. He draws it out with a deep roar, but Morgen only lifts her elbows smoothly and twirls to meet him. I touch my throat, thinking of the sickening crack his sword would make if he lopped Morgen's head from her graceful neck.

His chest is puffing like a beast waiting to attack, and Morgen prowls lightly around him. His knees bend, readying to pounce with all of his strength. I know if he hits her she will die. Water splashes over the rail and runs beneath their feet. Time comes to a standstill in the fraction of a second when his boots begin to leave the ground. I stare at the dark pools, focusing on the space beneath Harri. Morgen looks ready to deflect him, to fight all night, but I can see the sharp determination in the swing of his arms. He means to kill swiftly and fight dirty. This is a man who has been waiting for the right time to claim his power.

I want him to fail.

The water twinkles with pale blue lights. I muster up my focus, forcing the puddle to erupt in small bursts. The lights blink out as they surge, knocking him off his feet. He hits the deck hard, his hat flying off to sea and his sword clattering over the boards. Morgen looks at me with a nearly imperceptible shake of her head.

She knows what I did. She's angry.

"No." She picks up his sword and hands it to him. "Keep fighting."

Harri climbs to his feet, but he's unsteady and limping from the fall. He lurches forward, but Morgen blocks him again and again. Her blade presses against his, and although her breathing is heavy, I can tell that she's winning.

"Fight me," she says, as Harri shakes and pants, giving up. He grunts and drops his blade, nearly falling on her sword.

"You win," he says, stumbling. He hangs his head, rain sluicing off him.

"No." Morgen's boots tap along the deck and she tries to wrap his fingers around his sword to force him to keep going. Her mouth twists up when he drops it again.

"There's no point, Mor. You know I burn my strength out quickly." He smiles grimly. "I challenged you and you won, fair and square. I only hope

that your plan works, for everyone's sake."

She sets her jaw, leaning back from him like she has to remind herself there was a reason for the fight.

"Then I will make your execution quick and painless for all your years of service."

The swagger has been sucked from the air around her. The rain weighs down her movements now that there's nothing to struggle against. She moves slowly, procrastinating.

"Stop!"

"My lady," Jacques calls as I dart past him. He stumbles behind me until I'm in front of Harri, holding my arms out.

"Don't do this, Morgen." I don't know why I'm throwing myself in front of this man. I was just wishing for his death; I *aided* in harming him for Goddess' sake. But I know that Morgen has a long history with the quartermaster and that killing him will probably do more damage to her soul than she knows. Morgen's grip wavers. Maybe they can still work something out. She looks like she wants to when she sighs and pushes her sopping hair back.

"That's not how we do this. This isn't your call." Harri says bitterly. Rain slides past his bushy brow. "I challenged her and I lost, but she knows I'm right about this nonsense. I can see it in her eyes. The decision is yours, Morgen. You're as stubborn as your father, but you've always made smart decisions, girl."

"I'm not a girl." Morgen looks past me. "Move out of the way, Snow."

Harri pushes me aside, and I go sliding on my belly, clawing at the slippery wood.

He stands on his knees and lifts his chin. "It's either me or her. One of us is not going to make it off this boat alive, and you know you need me." His words are choked off, his eyes going wide before he dares to look down at the dark stain spreading over his abdomen.

"No one touches the fucking princess on my boat." Morgen's voice is as threatening as the roll of thunder. She twists her blade, scowling as she draws it out. Harri's mouth gapes with a silent last word of advice before his eyes roll back and he flops over.

"Don't watch, my lady. It will upset you." Jacques holds out his hand.

"It's all right. I've seen many deaths." Still, I look away from the mess. It wouldn't have happened if I'd never come aboard.

“The would-be princess is on our ship. If anyone else wants to challenge me on this, I suggest you step forward now,” Morgen shouts, holding her blade up to the sky. “Anyone?”

Fierce energy snaps off her shaking silhouette. She sounds as bloodthirsty as she looks. No one takes her up on the offer. They’d have to be mad to fight her in this unhinged state.

“Then I will make sure we get to Gentrilly and see that you all get your payment as promised. But if anyone dares to touch our passenger, or try to sell out her whereabouts to anyone outside of this boat, you will be automatically sentenced to death. Is that clear?”

She’s met with a resounding round of *aye Captain*.

“Let’s get you out of here before the crew gets rowdy getting back to their bunks,” Jacques says. We’re heading back to the cabin on unsteady legs when I hear the wet flap of leather and feel the touch of a familiar hand on my shoulder.

“Captain,” Jacques starts. “I was just getting her back to her cabin.”

“No,” Morgen says, drawing me to her. She wraps an arm around my waist until I’m pressed close to her, not slowing her steps as we pull away from Jacques. I can feel her heart thumping away. “You’re staying with me. I won’t risk that happening again.”

MORGEN

I'm shaking, rage as sharp and hot as lightning still pumping through my veins. The past hour has been a fever dream—a nightmare.

The man I've known longer than anyone else is gone. Dead at my hand because he couldn't keep his thoughts to himself for a little while longer. Someone is tossing him over the side of the boat, and the rain will wash the rest of him away.

My abs tighten at the memory of how my blade felt in his gut and the way Snow looked when she was about to go over the rail. She had her arms spread out like she was ready to take flight, her skin glistening in the storm. I had to save her, my precious...

My precious bag of gold. That's the only way I can think of her.

I grunt and trudge forward, pulling her along with me. I see an obstacle and react. I don't think too hard about what I'll do because I can't let myself care. Not about him, and certainly not about her.

My life only works when it runs like a machine. My cursed beating heart is the one thing that can stop the cogs from turning properly, so I ignore its damned pleas for attention and show Snow to my Captain's quarters without any extra coddling.

The boat tilts and she paces forward like she's running downhill and ready to fall. Despite my best intentions, I lunge and grab her before she can hit my desk.

"Are you hurt?" It's a practical question when a reward is at stake, I remind myself.

"Not really."

She shakes her head in the dark, spraying water droplets on me. She's trembling, her body shivering in a dainty fit that's much more discreet than the violent tremors in my legs. I flick on the lantern. We'll have to assess the damage quickly. Fires and unstable wooden vessels tend to not mix well.

I push back her wet sleeves, looking for any cuts or bruises. She frowns, but that's a fair reaction considering she saw me behave exactly like the pirates she's been afraid of her whole life. I didn't miss her trick with Harri, but she didn't mean for him to die. I can practically feel her judgment while I check her neck and shoulders. She can think poorly of me all she wants. There was no way I could have let him walk away from that scene.

"No apparent injuries. You can wear one of my nightshirts tonight and fetch your things tomorrow, but you need to get out of these wet clothes or you'll freeze," I say stiffly and drop her wrists.

"Morgen." She reaches out this time, stopping me from turning down the flame. She touches my face, running her thumb over the corner of my mouth. "You're bleeding."

Her frown deepens as she swipes at the gash on my lip where Harri's fist landed. She's not disgusted. She's concerned.

For me.

She grabs the wet rag from my wash bucket and dabs at the spot. Her face is two shades paler than usual. Her skin is clammy. She looks terribly tired, but she cleans the cut with the professional ease of a healer.

"There. Good as new." She rinses out the cloth and hangs it on the bucket. Bringing her bare fingertips back to my face, she touches the sore spot gingerly, then closes her eyes to murmur about the moon.

"No magic," I spit and move her hand away. "Not on me."

"Ouch." Her fingers curl in my grip. Guilt stabs at my sides. I'm harsh because I must be, but sometimes I hate it.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No," she says, staring at her hands where the faded blue glow is barely visible. "It felt like a sharp cord was lashing back at my magic when I tried to heal you. I've never had that happen before. I must have spent too much energy when I tripped Harri."

She glances up at me.

“That must be it.” I let her believe it. It’s not like I can tell her the truth anyhow. “You shouldn’t have done that by the way.”

Another kind of storm settles over her face, making her appear just as wet and irritated as she must feel right now.

“He wanted me to die. He took me from the safety of my cabin and tried to shove me overboard. I would have drowned.”

“You wanted your own revenge, then?” She turns her neck, but my curiosity has been piqued. This woman was raised to be a snow white, precious and fearful of the outside world, but she’s not above her own desires to kill when hurt.

“Not exactly.”

“Nothing to be ashamed about if you did, but the fight was between me and him. You tipped the scales and made it unfair.”

“Was I supposed to watch while he hacked you apart?” she glowers.

“I had it under control,” I argue. “Then you changed your bloody mind anyways and tried to protect him like I was the one in the wrong!”

“He tried to kill me and you stopped him. Then I tried to stop you from losing it and killing him because I know what that does to people. You can’t step in to save me and expect me to not do the same for you,” she bursts out.

No one besides my father has ever put their body between me and something that might cause harm. The air crackles between us. Her chest heaves with the pent-up emotion of the night.

I have to put a stop to this before I lose it again and risk it all to have her pour that energy out on me.

“I didn’t do it for you,” I whisper. “If I allow one instance of mutiny on my ship, then more will follow. Harri disobeyed my orders. He had to die.”

“I don’t believe you.” She grabs the cloth again and wrings it out hastily, annoyed by the task now. “I won’t use my magic if it makes you uncomfortable, but let me check the rest of you.”

“No.” I knock her hand away when she gets too close to the strings tied at the top of my blouse.

“Fine, but try not to die of infection before I get to Gentrilly.” She huffs and takes the bucket with her to the corner. “Fair warning—I’ll be disrobing and cleaning myself. I don’t know how you’re going to handle this situation since you can’t stand being in the same room as me.”

Gods.

I didn't think that part through. I'll have to continue to not think as I hear her heavy gown hit the floor and the scrub of dry linen against her soft skin. I toss her a flowy white nightshirt without looking.

"It's safe to look now," she says, but I won't until the lights are out.

"Get in bed," I tell her. The ropes creak as she climbs on. "Face the wall until I'm done getting changed."

I glance over my shoulder twice to make sure she's not looking before I start to strip my blood and rain-soaked clothes. I do it quickly. Harri didn't leave too many marks, but a ripping pain runs from my elbow to my wrist. I save that part for last, examining the wound that comes from within. I know it won't be pretty after tonight's actions.

Green scales press their way through my raw skin. In a few days, they'll sit flat, but now they flake up, cutting through my flesh.

"You're no beauty like your mother was," my grandmother told me all those years ago when my skin was smooth and flawless. We would sit at her vanity and she would comb my hair. "But your skin is like porcelain, so fair you can see the blue veins all the way up your arms, and your hair is black silk just like hers was. If you carry yourself with grace and poise, then the nobles might overlook the unfortunate circumstances of your birth and breeding."

I don't think of the woman often anymore. Stiff as she was, I cried for her when I was snatched from her home. I soaked my pillow until my father taught me that my tears were no longer tolerable, but for years I worried she would find out about my curse. I used to check around corners and down alleyways, afraid she'd see me wearing dirty clothes and talking to thieves. What would she say if she could see her porcelain doll now?

I want to vomit as my skin peels back, but the scales mean freedom. They prove I'm becoming cold-hearted enough to serve Cosette's needs. Killing Harri when I could have locked him up and spared him was another sick test I passed.

Or I couldn't bear the thought of Gwen's body being swept to the bottom of the sea.

No. I push down on a scale. The pain drives the voice from my mind, and a guttural sound escapes my throat.

"Are you seasick? This storm hasn't been easy on my stomach," Snow says, her voice muffled by the wall.

I make sure she hasn't seen me and tug a fresh nightgown over my head before turning the flame down on the lamp.

"I haven't gotten seasick since I was a child," I answer, even though my stomach is churning. Most of the crew will be struggling tonight.

"Then why are you breathing like that? You're in shock, aren't you?" She shifts in the bed. "I'll come down there and help you."

"No."

I take a seat on the floor, hugging my knees to my chest. My quarters are the finest on the ship. The wide stern windows let in the most natural light, but tonight there's only darkness on the rolling black sea, so she can't see me.

"I can hear you down there groaning and shaking. You need someone to talk to or at least touch..."

"I don't need anybody for anything. Goodnight, Snow," I say, even though there's no hiding who she is from the rest of the crew anymore. She only responds with a small *hmpff*, and I turn on my side, the itchy pain in my arm keeping me awake while I try to think about the deep, cold sea and nothing else.



THE TENSION in my neck and abdomen keeps me glued to my spot on the floor. The storm starts making its journey south, the pelting rain slowing to a mild drizzle. There's nothing more relaxing than the sound of a dying storm, but I can't uncoil the tight knots in my shoulders enough to enjoy it. The bed groans with Snow's restless turning. Her breathing is far too shallow for her to be asleep. She's been lying awake for hours, and so have I, though I'm trying to forget she's here.

I hug my arms around myself, teeth chattering. I need to get some rest and sleep off this feeling, but I don't want to slip into some warm fantasy where tonight never happened. My transformation must be complete by my next birthday, and there's no time to waste.

A sheet of fabric slips from the bed, followed by two feet hitting the ground. I tense even further, my limbs snapping to attention as warm air hits the back of my neck.

“What are you doing down here?” I growl at the woman curled up behind me.

“I fell out of bed,” she says.

I know the inner workings of this boat better than anyone. I know how the floorboards expand in tropical climates and the parts that drip in a downpour. I know every sigh and creak. It’s how I knew something was amiss tonight—the slamming and slipping noises tipped me off to the debacle.

And it’s how I know she’s lying.

“Then maybe I should tie you up so you won’t keep falling out of bed,” I threaten, rolling to face her. I regret the words instantly. I’ve never been the praying sort, but I send up a silent plea that she won’t engage.

Her laughter vibrates close to my mouth, and her thighs graze mine. She lowers her voice to a husky whisper. “Maybe you should. Maybe I would like that.”

Gods.

Heat slips over my skin. I’m crazed from the killing, from seeing her in danger when I’ve promised a safe passage.

I shouldn’t give into this again when I’m still trying to rid her from my system after Seshly, but heat slips over my cold skin at her invitation. I nudge my knee between hers, and she opens nicely for me. Her cunt is warm against my thigh, and I’m always cold, so I dip my fingers down to feel her.

“I keep trying to push you away, and you keep coming back,” I breathe, rubbing tight circles over her clit. She runs her hand over the fabric of my nightgown, bumping the cold stone of my pendant and touching my breast lightly like she knows I’ll stop if she pushes too far.

“Because I don’t think you really want to get rid of me. I think it drives you mad when I ignore you right back,” she laughs. “Admit it.”

Fuck. She’s finding every crack in my armor and poking her fingers into them.

“Fine. I hate that you’ve been avoiding me.”

“You’re the one who told me to stay out of your sight. But you know what?” She doesn’t leave me any space to answer. “I think you’re like one of those rakes from a romance novel. You’re afraid of being the kind of person who takes a lover to bed for more than one night.” She rocks into

me, slick and wet along my fingers and leg. “You have commitment issues.”

If only.

“Maybe I do.” I slip one finger in, controlling my impulse to take her too quickly.

“But I won’t be on this ship forever, and you make my magic sing. Why should you deny us the comfort of each other when I’ll be gone soon and we both feel this attraction?”

She explores lower, and I try to think of a way to tell her she’s wrong, but I come up empty. I’m pulsing so hard for her that any excuse would be an obvious lie.

She touches my abdomen and hips before she starts bunching up my gown. She’s too close to finding the parts of me that no one else ever touches or sees. I interlace my fingers through hers, sliding my leg up to take the space my hand leaves. She grinds against my thigh with a moan, and I want to stay here like this and let her ride me and use me as she pleases, but I must stop her hands from wandering.

“Then I won’t deny it, but you are mine to touch and please until we make it to Gentrilly.” Her mouth quivers near my jaw. I stretch my neck back. “We do not kiss, and you do not touch me. But I will make sure your needs are met, and you can practice your magic *if* you agree to the terms.”

“I agree,” she says.

“Then get back in bed.” I help her up to the mattress, making sure she doesn’t actually fall before I turn up the oil lantern again. She sits on her knees, watching as I rummage through my desk. I sling a loop of ropes over my shoulders and open the polished wooden box.

Glass and steel ornaments shine against the velvet lining. She leans to get a better view.

“What is that?”

“My treasure chest.” I shut it, not ready to decide which one to use on her yet. “Lie back, and if anything gets too intense or you don’t like what I’m doing, then say the word *barrel* and I’ll stop.”

“Okay,” she says, stretching out and lifting her skirts for me already. She doesn’t even wait for me to ask.

“I love how you give it up for me,” I tell her, pressing her heel toward her ass so I can bind her ankle to her thigh. I do the same to the other. “So sweet to look at and so lovely to touch.”

I reach behind her shoulders, undoing her laces to pull her dress down. She reaches for my face, but I catch her hand. "You're breaking the rules already," I *tsk* and tie her wrists above her head.

I sit on the edge of the mattress, pushing away to watch her squirm and pant. Her gown is gathered at her hips, her wet cunt on display and gleaming in the low light. Her tits spill out, full and capped with dark pink nipples. I want to suck them into my mouth, sweet candied cherries that they are, but first I delight in feeling the heavy weight of her breasts, lifting them and letting them fill my hands, then I pinch a nipple before pulling it between my teeth.

"Captain," she gasps, and I flick my tongue against the hard bud. I pull back, realizing what she just said.

"How come you never call me that?" I ask, keeping my mouth close to her sensitive skin.

"Because I'm a passenger, not a member of your crew." She arches her back, trying to press closer to me. "But it feels like you're in charge of me tonight."

"And you like that?" I ask, trailing my lips down the soft swell of her belly.

"Yes."

"Perfect." Wickedness will keep the night from becoming too tender. "I'm glad you can take orders when necessary, Princess."

Her stomach flutters beneath my lips.

"I'm truly not a princess, the treaty—"

"I think you'll find such titles are not so easily stripped in the minds of your people," I murmur and stroke her thigh. "But I'll call you *Princess* regardless because I want you to lie back on that pillow like a royal spoiled brat and take whatever I have to give you."

I grab my box of toys off the bed, choosing a rose-colored wand with a blooming flower handle.

"I wouldn't have taken you for the type who collects such pretty trinkets," she muses.

"I happen to appreciate beauty," I say and brace a hand on one of her bent knees, rolling the glass surface over her breasts. I push the wand into her mouth, working the first bulbous curve past her lips. "Now warm this up."

She closes her eyes and opens her mouth wider, licking the entire surface with the flat of her tongue. My cunt pounds seeing how she flicks over all three rounded bulbs that bubble along the length. She knows what she's doing to me.

I pull the toy out and situate myself between her legs, pressing the wand to her slit. She wiggles and tries to look, but she's bound and at my mercy. I run a thumb over her clit and revel in her wetness as I push the first bulb into her with my sword hand. I draw back before thrusting two more inches and another bulb into her.

She cries out.

"Hush or the others might hear," I warn although pride swells up inside me at the thought of anyone else knowing I have her in my bed. "Can't have you finishing too fast."

I take my hand from her pussy, focusing on the wand as I fuck her slowly. Watching her squeeze and clench around the wand kicks off a deep throbbing that spreads from my chest and runs down to my own aching cunt.

"Morgen. Captain," she calls for me, keeping her voice low. "Please."

"Please what, Princess?" I take my fingertips back to her clit, keeping my rhythm. The touch is too light to do anything but tease.

"Please," she chokes. "I'm so close."

I know she is. I can feel her tightening around the glass.

"And you want to finish? To use me for your magic?"

There's a beat of silence, then she whines softly, "Yes."

I rub over her clit, stroking it and rubbing circles until I find the touch she responds to best. Her thighs start to shake in the binds.

I draw all three bulbs of the wand out at once, eliciting a sound from her that's half-screaming and half-gasping, and I sink down to the foot of the bed where I can lap at her hot wet center.

Her hair is coming back in a layer of peach fuzz; I rub my lips over her folds, flicking my tongue between to soak up her salty sweetness. It's the most delicious fruit, one I should never taste, but the frenzy of tonight's battle is still pumping through my veins, and I'm functioning in a primal state, unable to think of anything but devouring her. Any other goals I have left in this body dissolve to make way for giving Snow her release.

I work my hand beneath my nightgown, circling the glass over my cunt. The whole thing is hot and slick from her body.

“Are you going to *fuck* yourself with that?” she asks, her voice cracking over the profanity. Such dirty words from that sweet mouth.

“I am,” I murmur against her and lick her clit with the flat of my tongue. “Now that you’ve soaked it and got it all ready for me.”

I thrust into myself, taking the whole thing. It’s a lot to take at once, but I need the intensity. I suck and lash at her, working into myself at the same pace, mixing us together.

My orgasm builds quickly, its own perfect storm that I’m sailing straight into. I suck her clit hard, waiting to hear that cry of crashing pleasure before I thrust my tongue into her entrance, feeling her burst in my mouth as my own climax shatters through me.

I don’t come up for air right away. She catches her breath, and I lick her down gently, spreading her folds and feeling every last wave of her orgasm on my tongue until she’s soft and making small, contented noises.

I adjust my gown and stand up, making sure I’m not showing any skin. When I lift my head, I find there are blue lights winking from the mattress.

“What is this?” I crawl onto the bed, rubbing Snow’s wrists above the ropes. Pinpricks of light shine under the surface of her skin like sapphire dust in the moonlight.

“I don’t know,” she answers. “I was trying to channel that energy to my magic, and I lit up.”

“Really?”

She nods.

I untie her wrists and rub the place where the ropes rubbed against her. It’s a brisk act of aftercare, not tenderness. Everyone deserves a bit of soothing and petting after fucking. “Guess I’m that good.”

“*You—*” Her jaw drops, her curious look hardening. “You are so arrogant.”

“About my bedroom skills? Yes.” I massage her thighs and ankles free of the binds. “You would be too if you made women glow.”

“You’re joking? Aren’t you afraid of it?” I sit next to her hip, stretching one arm over her waist to lean on the mattress.

“No. I’ve seen you heal a woman who would have been dead in anyone else’s hands.”

“You’ve also seen me knock a man off his feet in the heat of a life-or-death battle.”

“He deserved it.”

I force a small laugh because she’s studying her arms like they’re capable of murder, and I hate to see her afraid of her beauty because her High Priestess convinced her it was wrong. Folding my fingers over hers, I hold her light in my hand until I realize how much I want to be holding her entire body.

“You’re not really going to sleep on the floor of your own room, are you?” she asks, sitting up when I step away.

I always do. I ignore the question.

“It’s a temporary situation.”

“It’s cold.”

“I’ll live.” I turn off the lamp and take my spot against the boards again.

“I’m cold. My jacket is still on my cot.”

She means *my* jacket. I stare at the walls and listen to the trickle of sand in the hourglass. If I don’t reply there’s a chance she’ll stop complaining and fall asleep before I start thinking of her being forced out of her room so violently.

Ignoring her doesn’t work. She sniffs and asks, “Can I please sleep down there with you?”

Allowing a shivering woman to share some body heat with me could hardly be considered selflessness. It’s a simple matter of warmth. Survival. And I cannot die before the hourglass runs out or the worst part of the curse will win.

“Fine, Princess. But no touching.”

Snow brings the blanket with her, covering us both. She respects the boundary I’ve set, turning her body away from mine. Our backs are facing each other, and though we’re not touching, heat fills the space between us.

“Thank you,” I whisper. It feels safe and formal because I can’t see her. “For helping me with Harri.”

“I didn’t do it for you. I only needed to make sure the woman defending me didn’t get killed,” she says seriously, mocking my own words and stiff tone before bumping her ass against mine.

I’m prepared to stay up all night, pushing away all the thoughts and regrets about what I’ve done, but I fall asleep easier than I have since the days before I was taken out to sea.

GWEN

Morgen is gone by the time I wake up. The day is quite bright already; the corners of the room hidden by last night's shadows are visible now. Balled-up papers litter the floor beneath the bed, and a blouse sleeve hangs out of one of the oak dresser's open drawers.

I press away from the floor, groaning as I stretch and wipe the sleep from my eyes. I've overslept. It's funny how lying next to someone on a hardwood floor can be more comfortable than curling up alone on a mattress. And after last night, I think Morgen needed someone next to her too.

But she's not here.

She does have important tasks to oversee as Captain, but worry chews at my insides. I let go of my resolve to ignore Morgen the moment she took me to her bed, and now I'm probably going to have to pay for that mistake with another humiliating bout of rejection. I'm stuck in her room until she inevitably sends me marching back to my cabin in her nightshirt.

I pick up her crumpled nightgown from beside me and hang it on the bedpost, tracing over the word carved into a heart on the wall. *Elizabeth*.

I knew several Elizabeths at the temple. Their faces blend together to form the blurry image of a woman lying with her head on Morgen's lap, making her laugh on a cold morning. Did the captain lose the light in her life? It would explain the hard look in her eyes and her determination to keep me at arm's length.

Dust motes float in the post-storm sunshine, dancing over stacks of leather-bound books on Morgen's desk. The pages lie open with ink blots

and passages of elegant handwriting squeezed into the margins. There are no heart doodles or names scribbled anywhere besides the wall. The notes are all technical and related to nautical science—they lend no insight into her thoughts or feelings.

The papers scattered over the surface are just as useless. I shove them into a neat pile to run a wet cloth over the layer of dust. So much about the captain remains a mystery to me, but one thing is for certain—she’s a bit of a mess. She shouldn’t leave me unattended in her room if she doesn’t want me to tidy up. I’m careful not to mess with anything she’s reading or working on, but I move things aside until the desk is mostly clean and a little more organized.

“Are you awake in there, my lady?” Jacques calls softly from outside.

I stop dusting right when I’m about to sweep over the wooden box sitting on the ledge. My thumbs itch to lift the lid and peek at the toys inside.

“I am,” I answer, my heart pounding as I step away from the box and what it holds.

“Captain told me to wait until you were awake, and I thought I heard you stirring in there.”

“She could’ve left a note,” I mutter but spot the unopened envelope marked with the word *Snow* amongst the mess of her ledgers. There’s a short note written inside:

Thought you might sleep in. There’s a dry gown in my bottom drawer.

I get dressed quickly in another set of the same thing I’ve been wearing. It seems the ship from Gentrilly was carrying plenty of plain undergarments and yellow dresses in my size. At least they’re warm and easy to move in. I meet Jacques outside once I’m put together.

“My lady.” He bows deeply.

“You don’t have to do all that.” I wave for him to rise and start walking so that he’s forced to keep up with me. “I don’t want you to think of me any differently than you did yesterday. I’d rather take my walk and pretend that things are normal.”

“Yes, Prin—I mean, my lady. But how should I address you?”

Morgen and Skye are up ahead, leaning over the railing. A harpoon is slung over Morgen’s shoulder, and Skye is holding a spear. I lose track of Jacques’ question at the sight of them.

“Oh I...um...you should just keep calling me Snow,” I tell him, but my eyes are on the long line of Morgen’s neck. “It might prevent any slip-ups before we reach our destination.”

Morgen’s shoulders tense up as she jostles the harpoon. She steps back and holds the base of the weapon at her feet. I know a steel door is about to close over her features now that the heat of the night is over. I can feel it coming.

“That’s right. We don’t need any loose lips next time we pull into port.” She wipes her hands on her wide-legged trousers and looks at Skye. “See, I told you she’s clever.”

Skye looks between us and clears their throat. “Yes. Very clever.”

I stare up at the sky because it feels like everyone in the vicinity can sense the tension between us. Do they know what we did in her room last night? Does my scent cling to her skin the way it does to mine? I promise myself that I’ll keep my face neutral even if she turns cold and cruel again.

Something screeches alongside the boat. Morgen and Skye both whip around at the same time.

“I knew the damn thing was biding its time,” Skye says, and Morgen shoots the harpoon. The dart skates over the water.

“There it is.” Morgen wrenches back, and a horrid grey creature with overlapping teeth in its gaping maw struggles on the line, trying to flop itself back into the sea. “Have you met tonight’s dinner?” she asks as the fish stops resisting.

I grimace at the sight. I think I’d rather be hungry for a couple days than eat...whatever that thing is.

“I’m just kidding.” She coughs into the crook of her elbow, then pulls the harpoon from the jelly-like flesh. “These are terribly poisonous, but they follow ships and make docking dangerous.”

I think it’s the most I’ve heard her speak without being antagonized by me. Her mouth shuts tight as if she realizes she’s being friendly.

This is it. Surely she’ll remember to lock me in my room and throw away the key.

“That’s true, Captain. Nasty creatures,” Jacques says. “We’ll be out of your way now. I was just about to ask Snow if she had any advice for treating broken bones since the Moon Coven produces some of the world’s best healers.”

"I can set bones!" I clap my hands together. "Which bone has been broken?"

"You found her favorite topic, Jacques," Skye deadpans. "The lady from the bone tower loves to talk about bones."

Jacques turns beet red. I ignore their comment. "There's a poultice I can make for the pain. Who's hurt?"

"Rhys."

"Rhys," I repeat softly, remembering the cabin boy's rough hands pulling me out into the storm. The back of my head throbs.

I look at Skye and Morgen, but neither of their expressions changes. No one else saw him in the darkness, then.

There's something satisfying about seeing Morgen in a decent mood, knowing I had something to do with it. I don't want to watch her turn murderous again. Besides, Rhys is still a boy; I'm not keen on seeing him punished harshly.

"I can help him, but it'll be easier to treat him myself than to try to explain it," I tell Jacques.

He looks horrified at the thought.

"No, my lady. I can't have you doing work. It would be outrageous. Your mother would have my head. Tell her, Captain."

"Easy, Jacques. You might fear Queen Isobel, but she holds no power here. I say if Snow wants to get her hands on some bones, we should let her." Morgen looks at me. "Do you want to?"

"Yes."

"Then Jacques will take you to the boy." She furrows her brow. "Be careful."

There's an unspoken warning in her statement, and I know what it's for. No one else needs to find out about the magic that sparks up beneath my skin.

"I will be."

She nods and turns back to Skye at the railing. "Go with them."

"What if the sirens show up?"

"Better if you're not here," Morgen says. "We're almost out of their territory anyways."

The first mate shrugs, but they step in time with us. I glance back at Morgen. She's pressing her weight against the rail, her eyes set forward as if she's willing the boat to move faster.

“Cook is handling Rhys,” Jacques says, taking us to the galley. It’s a cramped space with essential items packed in where they’ll fit. Pots and pans hang from hooks on the ceiling. Jars and cans are stacked on the metal racks lining the wall.

“She’s not allowed in here,” Cook says and returns his attention to Rhys. The cabin boy shrinks on his stool when he notices me. His face is swollen and dotted with purple bruises beneath his eyes.

“Captain says it’s fine for Snow to help.” Skye pulls up another chair for me.

Cook lowers his spectacles. “It makes sense that she would have experience with this sort of thing, considering where she grew up.”

“We won’t speak of that,” Skye says firmly.

Cook doesn’t argue any further. He wipes the blood off his hand with a cloth and gestures for me to take his spot across from Rhys. The boy flinches when I touch the bridge of his nose.

“Whatever you slammed into got you good,” I say, inspecting the break from all angles. I don’t mention that Cook’s handling has made the swelling worse. He squirms as I try to get a feel for the break. I press my magic down deep. “I hope it’s a lesson for you to be more careful when you’re facing dangerous forces of nature. Next time you might not be so lucky.”

I crunch the bone back into place, and he screams.

“There. A simple fix,” I say with a smile. “If you have an aluminum splint, I can fit a healing salve beneath it. It’ll need to be changed twice a day.”

“I think I can fashion one,” Cook says, tossing his rag next to a wooden spoon on the butcher block counter.

“You should take care to keep cooking surfaces free of bodily fluids. It prevents infections and stomach bugs.”

Cook strokes his beard and frowns.

Oh heavens. I’m overstepping again.

“Anything to reduce the number of times we get the shits,” he laughs. “Here, I’ll show you the herb rack. I think we can both learn from each other.”

I pinch pieces of dried calendula into a small bowl, making a paste. Explaining the steps of my process lightens my heart. Down here, in the pirate ship’s galley is the closest I’ve felt to home since I left.

“The moon is new and starting fresh,” I say, stirring the herbs into a waxy paste. I can’t believe I’ve been gone from the temple for a complete lunar cycle. “We can ask for her to heal as her power grows.”

“Is that all you can ask for?” Skye asks.

“No, we can work with the moon for anything as long as we’re mindful of her phases.” I smear some of the paste over Rhys’ nose. “I’m working with a special manifestation for this new moon—for the Goddess to see that I’m strong enough to keep myself safe from those who wish to harm me.”

Rhys’ jaw trembles as I fit the splint over the fracture.

“She certainly had an eye on you last night,” Skye says and bites into a biscuit. “Took care of one of your enemies at least. It’s quiet around here without Harri booming about.”

“Aye, it’ll take some getting used to,” Cook adds. No one is crying over the gruff man, but a wave of sadness settles over the kitchen.

“I’m not sure your mother will be pleased if she hears you speaking so passionately about the moon,” Jacques pipes up, moving on from the topic of Harri.

“If she didn’t want her talking about the moon she shouldn’t have sent her to live in a temple devoted to it,” Skye says. “Use some common sense.”

“They both make good points,” Cook says. “Knowing Queen Isobel, she’ll prefer you to keep your lunar leanings private. But there’s no need to hide them around us. We have all sorts of folks aboard. Nothing can surprise us.”

I’m pretty sure I *could* surprise them, but their reassurances put me at ease.

Cook fogs his spectacles before wiping them on his shirt. “My partner runs an apothecary in the Sartealean valley. His rituals are based on the magic of the dragons—centered around dreams and fire. But you remind me of him with your knack for healing.”

“Why aren’t you there with him?”

“Many of Sarteal’s natural resources dwindled after so much of the arable land was bombed during the war,” he explains. “Being on the water means steady pay and I can send goods back home.”

“Don’t you miss him?” I wonder aloud.

“Every day,” he chuckles. “But Conor is always deep in his work, and I have a bit of wanderlust in me. We’ve made it work for over twenty years now, but I’ll retire one day and make a full-time job out of pestering him.”

He lights up when he talks about Conor. The pit in my stomach is gaping. I know it’ll never be filled with love, but it’s hard not to long for companionship when I hear others gush about their partners.

“How lovely.”

Rhys slides down from the stool, clutching his hurt face. “May I be excused?”

“Yes, go to your hammock, boy,” Cook says. “You’ll be expected for dinner duties tonight.”

“All this talk about love made him skittish,” Skye says when Rhys practically sprints away from us.

“How about you?” I ask Morgen’s first mate. “Do you have someone special waiting back home?”

They make a face. “Definitely not.”

“They have lots of *someone specials*,” Cook laughs. “They’ve probably lost count. Your turn, Snowdrop. Tell us about this guard they’re saying killed you.”

“I—” I think of Shiloh’s scared, sad eyes when she dropped the knife and shake my head. “I don’t know who came up with that story. There was no guard. No lovers for me.”

“This conversation is unsuitable for royal ears,” Jacques says. “Never mind them. Queen Isobel is an excellent matchmaker. She’ll find someone worthy of you.”

There’s the mention of marriage again. There’s a nameless, faceless spouse I can only hope I’ll get along with.

Will they allow me at least this much freedom, or will they get upset about my need to touch plant matter and make medicine?

I don’t want to think of it right now. I’d much rather gossip about lovers and scandalous bedmates.

“I can handle it,” I assure my protective guardian. “How about Morgen?”

Cook and Skye exchange a look.

“Captain?” Skye asks.

“Yes. Does she have someone?”

“Captain doesn’t take lovers, and if she did, I don’t think she’d like us discussing her personal matters. She’s a very private woman,” Skye responds.

I take the hint. Questions about Morgen are off-limits. I’ll have to live with my curiosity. Or crack her open so I can learn her secrets.

I go back to the herb rack, determined to spend as much time as I can down here making myself useful.

“Dandelion root,” I murmur while rolling a jar in my hands. “This makes a nice tea for anyone who consumes too much grog. I’ll show you the proper ratio.”

I keep busy, showing Cook some advanced mixtures with what he has on hand. In return, he shows me his technique for making licorice juice. We pass some time, happily chatting away about what’s useful and what’s hogwash, but he eventually puts his pot on the stove.

“I need to get the next meal started.”

“I can help,” I offer, but he shakes his head.

“Sorry, can’t risk you getting burnt, and the galley’s about to get really crowded.”

I try not to let my disappointment show. “But you’re welcome to come down tomorrow morning. I’d love to squeeze as much knowledge as I can from you while you’re here.”

“I would love that.”

“I might even go back home and teach Conor a thing or two,” he says with a wink before I follow Skye and Jacques out.

I’m soaring on the high of using my hands and the prospect of getting another break from the boredom of the boat cabin tomorrow.

“I see scales,” Griff calls from the crow’s nest.

“Quick, get her back to Captain’s quarters,” Skye says, pushing me into Jacques.

“No, all of you stay back. You know the rules—we can’t take up arms against them,” Morgen shouts, running down from the upper deck. “I’m not losing any more of my crew to them. I can handle this on my own.”

“How are you going to do that?” Skye asks.

“The siren won’t touch me,” she says, cursing and stroking the bandage wrapped over her shoulder as she strides to the edge of the ship. “Don’t come any closer, and plug your ears if they begin to sing.”

She keeps her posture straight, but I catch the tremor in her hand before she tightens her grip on the railing.

There's a huge splash beside the boat and Jacques touches his sword hilt despite Morgen's warning.

The captain's shoulders soften away from her ears.

"Cordelia?" she asks incredulously.

"Thank the gods," Skye breathes.

"Is Cordelia a kind siren?"

"There's no such thing. Sirens have hearts of stone," Jacques answers when Skye scoffs at my question. "Cordelia is a mermaid. One of King Morrow's daughters."

"She won't lure us to our watery graves, but her guardian might if they find her here," Skye groans. "At least there's no sign of the faery yet."

"The faery?" I've never seen a full-blooded fae in person. Certainly not the kind with wings. The faeries that are left in our realm rarely come to Lavinsar, and even fewer visit the temple.

"Zephyr," Skye says the name dreamily. "They led a legion of air faeries during the war, winning many victories for Monarch Darien and the Kraken fae. But they were captured and King Morrow decided to make an example of them by forcing them into servitude. Now they're trapped in our realm and understandably pissed off about having to chase the king's most rebellious daughter around the sea."

Notes from my history books are a jumbled mess in my head. I think Gentrilly supported Monarch Darien in overthrowing King Morrow's rule. It had something to do with the decision to seal off the fae and mortal realms. It's sort of embarrassing that I remember so little about it. I hope I won't be quizzed on major historical events when I make it to my mother's court.

I step closer to Morgen, watching the figure swirl out of the water before diving back in. When she surfaces and flips her brown hair back, she looks like an ordinary young woman. Then I see her long, green-scaled tail slapping the water.

"Hello Morgen," Cordelia greets her cheerily, swimming alongside the ship. "Cosette has sent for you; the sirens are on their way. I beat them here."

"Fuck," Skye says.

I'd ask more questions, but I don't want to miss this conversation. Morgen senses me prowling closer and glances over her shoulder. Her mouth presses into a thin line, but she doesn't tell me to go back.

"Thank you for letting me know. I'll head to the cove before they can reach us," she says and reaches into her pocket. A doe-shaped trinket sparkles in the palm of her hand. "Here's a payment for your warning."

The mermaid's bare tits bob in the water, her hair fanning out as she jumps through a wave to catch the bauble. She's a sleek creature, smiling with teeth that look sharper than a human's. I'd be jealous of the way Morgen is looking at her, but I'm in awe of her beauty too. Besides, there is nothing more than a night of pleasure between us.

Cordelia runs her finger over the doe's snout.

"This is perfect for my trove."

"Thought you'd like it," Morgen says. "I've been holding on to it for a while now. You'd better be going before Zephyr shows up."

Cordelia grins.

"They're looking for me out near the cliffs in Sorciere," she laughs, but her mirth fades quickly. "Be careful going to Cosette's. The sirens could still show up, and they'll be pissed I messed up their plans to snatch someone from your crew."

"I'll steer clear of them," Morgen says. "I won't let them find out who told me. But promise me something?" The mermaid cocks her head to the side. "Don't go to Cosette if you need something."

A strange look passes over the mermaid's face, but she tips her chin in a small nod before plunging back into the water.

Morgen pushes away from the railing, passing right by me.

"We need to take a detour," she shouts up to Griff.

"No detours." Lilah's pink skirts are visible on the edge of the upper deck as she calls down to us. "I mapped everything out *before* I knew we were carrying someone who could get us all killed." She looks pointedly at me. "We need to get to Gentrilly as soon as possible."

"When Cosette calls, we answer. It can't be negotiated."

Lilah sighs through her nose and enlists crew members to help shift the sails.

Morgen rolls her shoulders, scratching at her neck and chest. I should check her for hives later, but I know what happens when her mood turns sour like this, so it's unlikely that we'll be sharing a room tonight.

Skye breaks off from our group to talk with Morgen and Sampson, but Jacques and I keep walking.

“Where are you going?”

The captain's voice stops me in my tracks.

I turn back, the tips of my ears burning. I've told myself a thousand times today that this would happen.

“I'll see myself back to my own cabin,” I tell her. Her brow creases, and she moves toward me.

“Give us a moment, Jacques.”

He steps aside.

“If you're going to banish me from your room after last night, at least do it privately.”

She tucks a strand of hair behind my ear and drops her voice low.

“I'm not *banishing* you, Snow.”

“You're not?”

“Didn't we make a deal?”

“Yes.”

“Then why would I want you anywhere else but in my cabin?”

I can't answer. Her gaze is too hot.

“No more wandering today. I want you in my bed, waiting for me,” she says and rejoins the crew, moving seamlessly from bedroom talk to issuing orders. No one would ever guess the command she just gave me, judging by the cold tone of her voice.

I can't think of anything else but letting her have me splayed out again for her. I am hers until we arrive at my mother's palace, and I'm more entranced by the promise of fun in the captain's bed than the uncertainties of royal life.

MORGEN

Yesterday I woke up in a tangle of limbs—my arm was draped over Snow's waist, and her leg was resting on top of mine. I'd killed Harri then slept through the night. The whole night.

I didn't blink my eyes open until the first light of dawn broke through the window. I was warm and comfortable. I've never spent a night in someone's arms, never exchanged my breath with another person's for hours in a dreamless slumber.

It's only natural to curl towards something soft and warm, I thought. But I have never known warmth or softness, and I've made it too far without those luxuries to trade my soul for a sample of them.

So I slipped away from her, as gently and quietly as possible, swearing that I wouldn't let it happen again. I told myself to be indifferent, but when I saw her on deck beneath the sky that had been scrubbed clean from the violence of the night before, I was only glad we'd made it through together.

I couldn't be cruel.

I *won't* be cruel. Not to her. Not when this is temporary. I can deal with my tongue tying up around her, and the way she makes my heart beat faster. She'll be gone soon, and I will be too. We'll part ways at the end of this journey, and things will happen as they were meant to all along.

I just can't risk waking up with my body cradled around hers again. She'd scent my weakness and draw me nearer, and I'm not so sure I'd resist.

With Cosette calling for me, it's better to avoid the problem altogether by keeping her up all night with me. There are no awkward mornings if we

skip falling asleep. I can't have nightmares of the sea witch's cottage when I'm kneeling between Snow's thighs.

"There you are," I whisper against her pussy and swirl my tongue over her clit.

Snow lets out a breathy moan. She's glossed with a layer of sweat and arching her back as another wave of pleasure crashes through her. I kiss her folds while she's panting for air and stroking the sheets.

I keep my hands on her legs, checking the windows. The orange line over the horizon is thickening; the sun will be up soon.

Snow rests her hands on her belly and closes her eyes. It's safe for her to sleep now that I'm ready to start my day. But she puffs out a breath just as I'm about to stand.

"How do mermaids do it?"

"I—" My head feels numb and tired from the hours spent wishing I could feel her slick spots against my own. The question doesn't make sense right away, but when it does I let out a laugh. "What? Snow, are you asking me how mermaids fuck?"

She sits up. Her cheeks are flushed and her hair is a mess.

"Don't pretend you've never thought about it," she says, trying to smooth her waves.

Now *my* face feels hot. "I have...of course...they're nice to look at."

There goes my tongue again.

She giggles and slides her legs back, curling her heels up by one hip like a mermaid perched on a rock. Gods, she's nice to look at too.

"So?" she asks with a smile. "How does it work?"

"I don't know, Snow. I've never fucked a mermaid."

"Is that so?"

"I swear I'd tell you if I knew," I promise, feeling my mouth tug up into a grin. Somehow I'm laughing and smiling. Cosette's cove is close, but it feels worlds away from this spot.

"Who is this Cosette we're seeing?" she asks.

"She's..." This time I can't find the words because I don't know how to explain Cosette or who she is to me. The thought of her slips into the room like a specter, darkening my mood.

"She must be important if we're stopping to see her," she says.

"Important. Yes."

She reaches for the blanket and pulls it to her lap, covering herself from the waist down. The playful light in her eyes has dimmed, but I want to see it spark up again. It's the only thing that drives the darkness away when I think of Cosette and what she holds over me.

"What's wrong?" I ask her.

"Nothing," she says. "It's nothing."

It doesn't *seem* like nothing, but she says it so firmly that I back off from my questioning and wrap my hands around her ankles instead, pulling them back over the side of the bed.

"What are you doing?" she squeals, and I lift my head to see if she's shining bright again before I place her legs over my shoulders.

"Getting one more good wave out of you," I murmur and drag my lips up her inner thigh.

"I'm not sure I have another one in me," she says, but her breathing has shifted, and she's so wet already.

"Yes, you do. Come for me one more time, Princess."

I use my tongue and the palm of my hand to keep the threat of what's to come far away from this cabin.



THE SEA WITCH'S cottage never changes. Neither does the sick feeling I get in my gut whenever I cross the black cobblestones leading back to the bay.

Because I know the house will be sitting on the bright white sand—its clapboard siding all grey and cream against the blue sky. It will look just as pleasant and unthreatening as the last time I saw it and every time before.

I still get queasy when it comes into view. It's a quaint one-story home with a sun-bleached shingle roof and a white picket fence. The lawn is sparse and pale. The thatches of saltmeadow rush and seagrass are yellow with decay, and only the pitcher plants thrive in white pots beneath the shuttered windows. An insect scents the deadly nectar and falls into one of the tubular flowers.

"What a cute little place," Snow says, but she hugs herself tightly as we step closer. She senses something is off, even if she doesn't realize what it is yet. There's a foreboding aura around the cottage, a sickly sweet

scent of death. There's a reason it's the only home sitting back here when all of the others are clustered together near the other side of the village.

It's why Cosette's only regular visitors are the urchins. Kids who don't have parents to tell them to stay the fuck away from the sea witch are more than happy to run her errands and fill their pockets with coins and sweets.

I try to imagine Ronan here, young and hungry. I'm still angry with him. For everything. But none of this was his fault, really. He had no one but the sea witch to count on. How could he have known better?

Snow's fingers clamp around my bicep as we approach the porch. "Has something happened here?"

"No."

"It just feels like..." She drops silent when the seashell chimes clatter together without a breeze.

"She's inviting me in," I say and wipe the sand off my trousers. I look to the handful of crew members tagging along with us. "You know what I need the rest of you to do."

"Three jars?" Skye queries.

It's wrong to have them help me with this, but the faster she gets her offering, the faster we can set sail again. "Three jars."

"Three jars for what?" Snow asks, but I'm already pulling on my leather gloves and climbing the porch. I can't address any of her questions. Cosette is listening.

I've had to do this alone since Ronan passed. My father was the only person she ever allowed to accompany me inside her home.

The interior of the cottage is the same as it's always been too. I see the place in my nightmares often enough to remember all the details. I would be able to tell if anything changed.

I keep my hands clasped behind my back, choosing not to take a seat on the sofa. The wide windows provide a clear view of the tranquil bay out back. I fix my eyes on the water.

"You called for me?" I announce my arrival, although she already knows I'm here.

"I did."

The sea glass curtain clinks. *Don't look.*

But I can't help myself. Cosette's silhouette is visible. She moves over to her altar, placing tapered candles in their holders before setting them

aflame. They're burning high when she parts the teal and white beads.

Just like the cottage, she remains untouched by time. Her flaxen blonde hair is tied in a knot on top of her head, as thick and vibrant as it was two years ago. She has the kind of fair white skin that spoils easily in the sun, yet only the faintest lines trace the corners of her eyes. Her décolletage spills over a seafoam green dress, creamy and unfreckled.

"You haven't changed a bit," I say stiffly. She circles my body, keeping an uncomfortably tight circumference.

"You have," she laughs and grips the collar of my jacket. I've buttoned it to the throat, refusing to make her job easy. "Why, I only come up to your chest these days."

"I grew up quite some time ago."

"That's right," she says, "It's almost your thirty-fifth birthday, isn't it?" When my jacket is off, she parts the top of my blouse, examining my scales. "These are coming in beautifully."

"Is that all you wanted?"

"Why the rush after traveling all this way to see me? Are we not the oldest of friends? Stay and have some tea."

I want to get out of here, but turning down tea is a grave offense in Cosette's home.

"I would love a cup of tea."

She's only gone to her kitchen for a few seconds before she returns. Her blue eyes twinkle as she hands me a cup of brown liquid. It's hot and steaming, steeped at the right temperature as if she knew precisely what time I'd show up on her porch. My stomach turns at the oily globs bubbling beneath the surface, but I drink deeply, ignoring the thick taste of resin in the back of my throat.

She touches my pendant, pushing it against my sternum. I have to grip the cup tightly to stop my hands from trembling.

"Did you know your father tried to sell me this once?" she asks and pulls the blue stone out.

I'm not surprised. Ronan was obviously willing to sell all sorts of things.

"He never told me that."

"It was the very same day he gave your soul away."

"Is that so?" I ask flatly. I don't take the bait.

“Yes, but I turned him down. Such a thing is useless to me when it’s charmed with love magic.” She smiles up at me. “I’ve been thinking about it lately, though. Maybe I should have tried harder to crack the spell around it. Would you sell it to me now?”

“No.”

“What if I paid you enough to guarantee that your ship and your name would be written in the history books? A legacy to outlast the life you were given— isn’t that the very thing you’ve set out to accomplish before the hourglass runs out?”

The air has been sucked out of the room. It’s the *only* thing I’ve let myself care about. *The Ruined Soul* is the only part of me that people might remember.

But bargains with the sea witch never end happily, even if she knows exactly what will entice you.

“Still no,” I answer before I can think of a fleet so large we’d make our own Kingdom of pirates. The legacy might be all I’ll leave behind, but the pendant is all that I’ve ever had from my mother. I may never have a reason to unlock the door to her family’s enchanted cottage, but I can protect *her* legacy from falling into Cosette’s hands. The pendant—the key to the hideaway in the magic woods of Corstyliia—it stays with me.

“Very well, then.” She reaches behind my neck, pulling my plait over my shoulder. I braided it tightly in hopes that she wouldn’t look too closely at the silver strands, but she runs her fingers over the rope of my hair. “Oh, it looks like you’ve gotten quite grey in the past few years. Who is making you care so much? Is it that gorgeous first mate of yours? Or maybe that pretty flower, Lilah?”

I grind my teeth. *Don’t think of anyone.*

“There is no one.”

“Perhaps you want to keep your pendant so you can whisk someone special away to that magic cottage.” Her unnaturally sharp teeth show as her smile widens.

Don’t think of Gwen. Snow. Don’t think of Snow.

“I have no plans to use it. The charm’s magic will end with me.”

“That’s exactly what I wanted to hear,” she coos, stroking my cheek. “Because no magic will stop me from calling you back to me when the sand runs out, even if you try to hide from me.”

“I know that.”

“You get to decide if you want to come back to me as one of them.”

She takes my streaked plait and points it toward the rack near the window. Shells and sticks of incense line the shelves, but I only focus on the clear jars. Blue-grey shadows swim inside them. The souls look like miniature versions of the humans they once were. Only now they’re hopelessly trapped, waiting to be consumed by Cosette. To keep her eternally young and beautiful.

It’s where I’ll be if my hair turns to silver before I’m covered in scales and my heart has melted from my chest in an offering to the tide.

“There’s nothing to fret about,” she cheers. “I have a heart. I wouldn’t make a deal with your father on your behalf without giving you a way out. As long as you never give your heart away, you will join your siren sisters and serve me. Bring me souls to devour. As long as you are heartless and keep me satiated, you will have the freedom to swim the entire ocean. To fuck and kill and feast as you please.”

She repeats the conditions of the deal as if she’s doing charity work.

But as awful as the scales are, the jars are so much fucking worse. I bob my head like becoming a sea monster sounds delightful.

“I’ve trained myself to never long for love. I have no need for it,” I say.

“We can’t train the heart not to love.” She swishes away to twirl a smoking stick of incense inside its shell holder. “The heart will love whether or not we want it to. The thing that matters is being unwilling to give your heart away.”

“How does that make sense?”

“I suppose it’s not meant to make sense.”

“Then how is someone supposed to know if they’re giving their heart away?”

“Oh. You’ll know.” She blows out a lit match, flicking the ash-covered end with a long black fingernail. “Sirena had trouble near the end of her human life. She had so much grey hair, I thought the poor girl would surely end up in a jar one day.”

My cheeks puff out as I try to hold in the disgusted noise I make. I never try to imagine what the sirens were like before they became vicious, ripping creatures of the sea. They’ve tormented me too many times throughout the years.

“But when the hunters came for her dragon-mated love, she sold him out to save herself. She made the right choice at the last minute, proving herself to be a perfectly heartless minion.”

“That’s reassuring.”

Her shoulders shake with a light laugh.

“Her story was a little different than yours though. Her father *knew* what he was doing when he gave up her soul for his riches. What an awful man.” She sounds as if she truly pities Sirena, but she’s the one who bartered for her soul. “You can ask her about it yourself. She’s swimming up to the bay now.”

“Fuck.”

She snaps her head away from the window, ready to pick at any hint of conflict.

“You’re not excited to see dear Sirena?”

I dread seeing Sirena. Her favorite pastime is luring people from my boat to screw with me. Snow, Jacques, Skye, and Amelia are all out there. I need to keep her away from them, but I can’t go rushing to exit the cottage without being excused.

Cosette doesn’t take insults lightly.

“I would love to see Sirena, but I’ve only scheduled time to visit you. I must be on my way soon.”

Cosette rubs soot between her fingertips.

“I understand,” she says, but the unfriendly look in her eyes doesn’t match her expression. “Be on your way then.”

I tip my chin. “It was a pleasure seeing you as always.”

“Morgen,” she calls as I’m about to exit. A heavy stone drops to the bottom of my stomach. She never lets me go so easily.

“Yes?”

“Come back.”

I meet her on the woven rug. She lifts her chin and presses up against me. I’m always fighting against the sick tug of attraction I feel when she stands close to me. I’ve given in to her several times over the years. Each time it takes me weeks to cool the burning shame that racks my body after the deed is done.

“Come to bed with me,” she beckons, but today I feel nothing. She might be beautiful, but she does nothing to warm me from within. I could

take her to bed all night, and I'd still feel dead and cold inside. Not like how it is when I'm with—*don't think of her here*.

"Not this time," I tell her.

"Then kiss me with the promise of your return," she says. I lean down to let her kiss me because I want to leave. Because she's demanded it.

Her sharp teeth graze my lips, and I taste the coppery tang of my own hatred. The votives rattle on the mantel, splashing water over the sides, and putting out the tea lights floating in their holders.

She pulls back and tilts an ear to her shoulder. Her teeth are tinged pink with my blood.

"Does someone in your crew have magic in their veins? Perhaps a drop of fae blood?"

I stop myself from startling. She's a cunning predator. I can't give too much away with my face or my words. I can't let her find out about Snow.

"Not that I know of."

She turns from me and caresses her hands down her arms.

"Morgen, I think you might end up being my coldest minion yet."

GWEN

“You really shouldn’t be digging with us,” Jacques says for the tenth time, balancing his shovel against his thigh while he wrings his hands. “Skye, Amelia, and I have done this before. We’ll find three jars in no time.”

“We’ll find them even faster if you stop taking breaks to pester Snow, old man,” Skye grunts. They’re sweating, but they don’t stop digging to unbutton their jacket.

“I enjoy the work. It would be awkward if I stood around watching the rest of you.” I step on the edge of the shovel’s blade, pushing it deeper.

Amelia’s face is mostly covered by the wide brim of her hat, but I see her mouth drop open when she hits something buried beneath the sand. “Got one, but I’m not touching it!”

She’s a skilled diver—petite but packed with muscle and much stronger than she looks. I haven’t learned much about her beyond those basic facts. She doesn’t talk while she works on digging deep holes in the wet sand next to the cottage.

In fact, none of us have really spoken since we got here. I tried to make conversation when we first arrived, but my efforts wilted quickly. The sun’s glare is harsh on the white sand, the rays oppressive although there’s no warmth in the air.

Skye races over to Amelia and brushes the sand away from the hole. “Two down, one more to go!”

I squint to see what’s in the jar they’re holding. It’s filled with some sort of dull blue liquid that swirls without settling. I thought we might be

looking for standard piss curses that some folks keep buried in their yards, but that's not urine.

Sticking my tongue between my lips, I get back to work. I'd love to get the last jar and show everyone I can be helpful.

My hands are peeling around the wooden handle, and my back aches, but the labor is keeping the chill away. I find a hole empty and move to make another. And another one still. I dig until my shovel connects with something hard. I don't shout my discovery to anyone. I don't want Skye to rush over like they did for Jacques and Amelia. I want to pull it from the ground myself.

Dropping to my knees, I scoop the sand away with my hands until the rusted lid is visible.

"Snow, wait. I'll get that," Jacques says.

I scrape the sand away faster, smiling because I've found one. I lift it up, wiping the grit off with my sleeve. Dark energy seeps into my palms. I almost drop the container entirely when the shape inside presses its small face to the glass. Ghoulis features are painted on a miniature human figure. I've seen these shrunken grey things before—in texts on ancient, forbidden magic.

Never in real life.

Harvesting and trapping a soul is an act of evil.

"Why would Morgen bring us here?" I whisper, setting the poor soul down. Jacques is quick to take it from me.

"It's complicated. The sea witch demands it."

"And the captain obeys?" I cut my eyes at the pirates who are willing to go along with this abuse of magic. "I don't think anyone can make the captain do anything she doesn't *want* to do."

Who is this Cosette who has us digging up souls? I'm overcome with morbid curiosity. I need to see this woman, to find out for myself what kind of hold she has over Morgen.

I stomp over to the window and duck beneath the sill.

"No, my lady, you mustn't," Jacques protests quietly, but he jogs to join me when he realizes I'm not going to listen to him. He presses his back against the cottage, his chest heaving. "We're not supposed to get this close."

Skye and Amelia stay where they are, watching with concern. I don't care. I look anyways.

Through the window, I can see Morgen speaking to a fine-boned woman with pale hair. There's no denying her delicate beauty or the way Morgen seems to be hanging on her every word.

It seems the captain has a type. The woman she was with in Seshly shared similar features—a small snub nose, fair hair and skin, and bony shoulders.

Morgen walks closer to Cosette. Now there is no space between them.

My chest aches.

She might like me in her cabin when she's out to sea for a long stretch, but really, I'm no one to her. A bag of gold and a way to pass the time on a long journey.

Has she shown Cosette her treasure chest? Envy burns like acid in my stomach.

I'm not a jealous person. Open affection is encouraged at the temple, and I've been taken by more than a handful of lovers beneath the moonlight and up against pillars of skulls, their mandibles clattering away as background noise. Shiloh was the only one I ever shared anything exclusive with, but we both understood the confines of our relationship.

I latch on too easily. I seek praise. I seek attachment. I seek love, knowing I'll never have it.

Morgen has been firm with her boundaries. We get physical. She lets me play with my magic. Nothing more. Nothing less.

It should make things easier, but watching this scene feels like the time I lost my footing on the tower steps.

Cosette stands on her tip-toes, and the worst thing happens.

Morgen leans down to meet her mouth in a kiss.

No kissing. That's one of our agreements, but she has no problem kissing Cosette. Insecurity bites at me. It whispers mean things in my ears—*no one really wants you around.*

That greedy creature inside me is awake. It's livid in its hunger, watching as other people get exactly what it craves. Easy kisses and promised visits. Morgen must have some shred of loyalty to this woman to drop everything for her. To kiss her and have her crew participate in forbidden magic on *her* behalf.

My hands shake, and the candle holders atop the mantel do too.

Oh heavens.

I sink back down just as the sea witch leans back from Morgen. I sit so close to Jacques that our shoulders touch. Skye and Amelia are still holding their shovels, waving frantically at us. No one has come racing out of the cottage, but I can see the panic on their faces.

Jacques looks out to the water where they're staring and grasps my hand. I don't see anything but the movement of some sort of fish over the gentle waves. The tail is long—like that of a dolphin's, but it's covered in dark scales.

"Follow me," Jacques whispers and presses a finger to his lips. "We have to get away from that."

I move slowly on my hands and knees, just behind him. If I've gotten us all into some sort of trouble because of my temper, then I'm sorry for it.

Amelia drops her shovel and presses her hands to her ears.

A sweet, high-pitched melody floats up from where the bay eddies close to the cottage. It sounds like my mother is calling me to her palace. Someone is waiting to wrap me up in a warm hug that feels like home. I stop moving. So does Jacques.

He starts to stand, his old knees creaking. My trance breaks as I watch his eyes go wide.

"Elinor," he calls back to the bay. "Is that you?"

"Plug your ears!" Skye shouts. "It's a siren."

I see the shimmer of green scales cresting over the surface now. At first glance, the creature looks like a mermaid, but then I note the long black claws growing from her fingertips, and the sharp smile with even sharper teeth as she leers at Jacques. Unlike Cordelia, the siren has scales trailing all the way up her torso. They reach up her neck like a claw, her pretty face set atop the prongs.

She tosses her hair back over her shoulder. It's the same blue-grey hue that streaks through Morgen's hair, but the siren only has the smallest strip of a natural brown color left in her mane while most of Morgen's tresses are still black.

This creature is as alluring as the mermaid, but her beauty has a dangerous edge to it. I feel like I shouldn't be standing close enough to see the indents of the scales rippling over her breasts and arms, yet I want to keep moving in her direction.

“Elinor died at the beginning of the war, you old fool!” Skye yells, stomping past me. They wrap their arms around Jacques, wrestling him back from the water. The siren thumps her tail on the beach.

“No, she’s waiting right there for me. She’s been waiting this whole time.” Jacques throws his body forward. “Elinor!”

He’s never mentioned an Elinor, but the impact of her loss is apparent. I dig my fingers into the sand, not wanting to see my loyal friend’s grief or the siren’s horrible grin. I wonder if there’s a way to push her back. I close my eyes, envisioning the water around her.

My concentration is cut off quickly by the sound of the cottage door slamming.

“Sirena,” Morgen says, barely raising her voice as she runs in front of Skye and Jacques. “Stop it. This is not the time or the place.”

The skin around her lips is white when she tightens her mouth. The siren rests her head on her forearms, gazing up at Morgen from the sand, the picture of innocence as she swirls her tail in the water. Skye catches Jacques as the siren releases him from her spell. He’s panting and muttering to Skye. “*It was like she was really there. Almost lost myself...*”

“You always spoil the fun,” Sirena giggles. “But I suppose we’ll be better playmates soon.”

“I don’t want any more fucking trouble from you until then.”

“I won’t be any trouble at all.” She bats her eyelashes and slithers back into the water.

Morgen squeezes her hand over her braid before turning back to us.

“Did you find all three?” she asks as if the siren’s appearance was nothing out of the ordinary.

“Yes,” Amelia answers thinly.

Morgen glances at the four shovels on the ground. “What is this? Who had Snow digging?”

“I told her she shouldn’t,” Jacques says, standing on his own now. He wipes tears from his eyes, and everyone pretends not to notice.

“I wanted to dig.” I raise my chin, openly defying her orders for me to wait patiently on the beach while she enjoyed her visit.

Morgen lifts my hand, turning it over to swipe her thumb over my blistered palm. My rage retreats into its soft shell at the gentle touch. “We’ll need to wrap these.”

This woman can't possibly indulge in the dark magic of this place. Not when she makes my stomach feel as though I'm falling.

I pull my hand away. I can't make excuses for Morgen just because I like how she touches me—I *saw* her kiss the sea witch.

I stare at her, forcing myself to replay the kiss, trying to conjure enough disdain to pop the bubbles of jealousy floating behind my eyes, but blood starts trickling from the corner of her mouth.

She wipes the crimson dribble away with her sleeve, stopping me from touching it.

"Put the jars on her porch. We'll wash in the springs before we board," she orders and buttons her jacket. She breaks out in a quick stride, heading back toward the port village.

We all hurry behind her, ready to leave this place and wash the stink of death from our bodies.

When we first arrived at the cove, I thought the village shops were garish—all pink, teal, and violet with doors painted in bold hues meant to clash. But now I'm happy for the colorful sight, the break from the dead white stretch of the beach surrounding Cosette's cottage. There's life all around us. A woman sweeps the doorstep of a teahouse, and children line up around an open-air stall where a man is frying dough and sprinkling powdered sugar on top.

I'd happily wait for a taste, but no one else stops. I lick my lips and sigh. It's not like I have any coins on me anyway.

"The springs are just past these buildings," Jacques says, mistaking my disappointment for fatigue. We've walked far past the place where we docked the rowboat this morning, following the long strips of bootprints Morgen leaves in her wake. She keeps her determined pace, leading us up the sandy hills and rocky moors looming high above the ocean. *The Ruined Soul* is anchored in the distance, waiting for us to come back to her.

The change in elevation has me losing my breath. Jacques loops his arm through mine when I start to fall behind.

"No need to rush. Captain usually likes to spend some time here after visiting the cottage," he says, making no mention of Cosette or what happened with the siren. His face has been drawn and grim since we left.

"I don't know what happened, but I'm sorry about your Elinor," I tell him. His throat bobs, and I feel a pang of regret for bringing her up. "I shouldn't have mentioned her. You probably don't want to be reminded."

“It’s all right. You can’t remind me of her when I’m always thinking of her. When you love someone deeply enough, no one can pull their roots from your heart. I actually enjoy talking about Elinor and sharing her stories. She lives on that way.” He wiggles his jaw, considering what he’s about to say. “But I don’t like what the siren did to her memory. She would have asked for my soul. I would have given it to her because all I could see was Nor’s face.”

Is that what the siren was doing? Gathering souls for her mistress? I wish I had never touched the jar and seen the specter inside. I feel as though my hands will never be clean again.

Jacques is on the verge of tears, and I think I might be too when I hear his voice crack.

“Then don’t think of it. Tell me about the real Elinor instead.” I squeeze his arm, urging him on.

“I knew her my whole life,” he starts, and I forget about the exertion of our walk as he tells me about how he fell in love with the girl who lived two houses down from him.

He speaks about how Elinor always managed to make flowers grow in the spaces between the cobblestones and brick buildings. How she’d kneel for hours to coax roses to bloom where they didn’t belong. He paints an image of a woman who was a vibrant splash of color in an otherwise grey world.

I want to tell him they were lucky to have known such deep love, but I bite my tongue and listen. I can’t comprehend his loss. Anything I could possibly say to him would sound childish. I might not have been raised as a princess, but I’ve never known the struggles most of the crew members have faced.

“She sounds lovely.”

“Yes, she was the love of my life,” he says and stops in front of a stream. The water runs over the side of the hill to a pool on the beach. Down below us, Amelia is pulling linens from her backpack and laying them out on the sand. Skye is removing their clothes and wading right in.

“How are they swimming like that?” I ask, clutching my jacket at the throat. “It’s far too chilly for anything but a quick rinse.”

Jacques laughs. “I think you’ll like this part.”

We shuffle down to the bottom, and heat rises from the water, warming my bones beneath the layers I’m wearing.

“Come on in,” Skye says, water sluicing off their chest muscles when they stand up to their waist. “Amelia is too busy diving for shiny rocks to race me.”

“I’m sure Snowdrop doesn’t want to race you. She can have the springs to herself once you’re done washing up.”

But Jacques’ comment doesn’t register because I’m already folding up my jacket and sliding out of my gown to plunge into the water. I test the depths, exhaling until I sink far enough for my toes to touch the slick rocks at the bottom. I twirl back to the surface when my lungs are aching for air.

Jacques is standing with his mouth wide open.

“My lady,” he sputters. “I thought you might prefer to have your privacy.”

“Not when I’ve been challenged to a race.” I grin at Skye and splash water at their face. “Let’s go.”

I roll under the surface, kicking against the bank to propel my body forward. Skye might be faster and stronger than me on land, but I used to pass all of my free hours in the temple pond. I move through the water like it’s my home. I don’t stop kicking and stroking until I make contact with the rock wall at the other end. Skye’s hand touches it a fraction of a second after mine does.

“Damn! You’re faster than I thought you’d be,” they exclaim. “You didn’t tell me you had hobbies outside of playing with bones.”

“I have lots of hobbies, but this is the best one.” I rub my back against the warm rocks, working a knot between my shoulder blades. “I’d be even faster if it wasn’t so hot in here.”

The springs are warmer than a bath. The cold air feels nice against my skin. I want to see the look on Morgen’s face, but I can’t find her. There’s only Amelia waving for Jacques to come in while he gingerly pulls his boots off.

The discovery at Cosette’s cottage left me unsettled and angry with Morgen, but I saw the blood on her mouth. She’s keeping something from us.

“Where is she?”

“Captain?”

“Yeah, where’d she go?”

“Over there, I’d imagine.” They splash in the direction of the waterfall rushing over the hillside. The rock formation appears to be solid, but now I see the top of an arch just outside of the water’s edge. There’s a recess behind it.

“I’ve got to tell her I beat you,” I tease, but concern has wedged itself between my ribs. She stalked off so fast. I don’t know if she’s ok.

“Wait—she always goes off without us. She’ll be pissed if you go looking for her,” Skye says.

I swim off, thinking they’ll come after me. When I look back, they’re still treading in place.

“I’ll be right back,” I call and duck down again to drown out any protests, hearing the rush of water as I pass beneath the falls. I wait until the pressure eases before I come up for air.

Now I see why Morgen chose to come here. It’s a perfect hideaway, and she *is* a private person.

The hollow is a deep semi-circle with its own beach where the edges of the pool hit the white sand. Heat is trapped between the rocky walls of the hillside and the waterfall, creating a natural sauna. A pair of trousers and a linen blouse are thrown over a rock, and below it, Morgen sits with her toes submerged in the water.

She hugs her arms around her shins, resting her face on her knees. It’s a sad, drooping pose. Her hair falls over her shoulders in a dark, wet curtain while she presses her fingernails into the line of tattoos snaking around her calves. The green markings are all over her body, running up her thighs and twining down her forearms. Some even appear to stand up from her skin like real scales.

My stomach churns with a sick realization. Those aren’t tattoos. Blood is pounding in my ears when she jerks her head up—her mouth and knuckles have gone white.

“What are you doing here?” she growls and draws her legs in tighter.

“I’m sorry, I just came to check on you.” I can’t look away from the smooth sections of scales edged by sharper rows where they’re erupting through her pale skin. My initial fear has passed. They’re not the infectious sort.

“Now you know the truth,” she says, scowling above her knees. She reminds me of a child who’s been caught doing something wrong and

wants to double down on being rotten. "I'm a monster." I purse my lips and belly crawl to her. "Why aren't you leaving?"

"I want to take a closer look." I spit water as I swim up to the small beach. I lie on my stomach, half-submerged so I can see the scales glistening at her ankles.

"You shouldn't be looking," she snaps. "You shouldn't get so close."

"It's not scale rot," I assure her. "I've seen enough cases at the temple to identify it."

"I wouldn't let you share a room with me if I thought I had scale rot, much less touch you in my bed!"

"I know you wouldn't," I whisper. "You're not a selfish person. You care deeply for others."

Morgen turns her nose up and casts her eyes down at me. "You should rid yourself of such notions."

"Fine. Pretend to be terrible." I walk my fingers in the sand until I'm nearly touching her toes and pause. "May I touch them?"

"It's not scale rot. You said so yourself," she snarls defensively.

"I only meant to ask your permission."

Her tight-wound posture unravels with an exhalation. "I suppose that would be fine," she grumbles.

She drops her hands to the ground beside her hips, letting her guard down for the first time since I've met her. I don't let my eyes wander, even though they want to. I know how quickly she'll pull away if I don't move cautiously with her.

Keeping my touch gentle, I prod the web of scales on her left foot. They're healed in this spot—their texture is melded into her skin.

"They're sort of pretty," I say, ignoring the incredulous sound she makes. "But how did you get yourself cursed?"

"How did you know?" She skitters back, her eyes widening as if I've mentioned some forbidden secret.

"Nobles with powerful enemies seek help from the temple on occasion. All curses present differently, but I can feel the spiked energy beneath your scales." I study my fingers. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Her lips move like she wants to say something, but she doesn't make a sound.

"You can't talk about it, can you?"

She shakes her head. That does make things tricky, but I've dealt with silent curses before. I'm sure I can figure it out if I ask the right questions. I examine the scales further. They look similar to a mermaid's, or...

The siren's sharp claws come to mind.

"Are you transforming?" I ask gently.

She scrapes at the sand and nods. There's blood on her mouth and sorrow in her eyes. My head feels light, stuffed full of anger that rises like hot air when I think of Cosette.

"She wants you to be one of her sirens, doesn't she?"

Morgen draws a breath and speaks quietly although the waterfall blocks the noise. No one else can hear us in here.

"We shouldn't speak of her."

I clamp my mouth shut around the argument I want to make. I know what it means to be hurt by someone and still feel the need to defend them. It hurts to hear unkind things about Grimhilde even though I think them myself.

"Then I won't talk about her. But why would you make a deal that requires you to turn into one of those creatures?"

Most nobles make such trades for wealth or power, but Morgen doesn't seem like the type of person who would reach so greedily for status. I do remember one case where a viscount had agreed to shave years off of his life to spare his ill wife. He came to us to try to reverse it when she left him for a miner.

Some deals are made in the name of love. The word *Elizabeth* is carved into her wall and my memory. I'm not sure I can blame her if she made a hasty deal to save someone she loved.

But what happened to her? Morgen acts as though she's been alone for a very long time.

"It's not like that," she says before I can mention the name. "And it's not the worst thing that could happen."

"It's a double-edged curse?" Quiet horror sharpens her features, confirming my fear. "Your actions will determine the course it takes, then. What could be worse than having to harvest souls?"

Of course she can't tell me. I trace the pattern on her thigh, moving all the way up to her abdomen. She leans back on her hands, unfurling and softening as I smooth out her harsh angles with the palm of my hand.

"I want to help you."

“You can’t help me,” she says. “No one can.”

I reach her shoulders, and she lies back completely, letting me frame her hips with my knees. Morgen can command an entire crew with a single cold word. She rarely needs to use force to get a job done—people bend to her will.

But here in this hollow, she’s submitting to me.

“Let me try.” I touch the indent of her cupid’s bow, and she shudders out a breath. Cosette kissed Morgen and opened the wound from Harri’s blow. I hate the way that man stoked her rage, but I hate the kiss even more.

I depress her lower lip, exposing a line of red bite marks on the pink flesh. Goddess. I want to go back and rattle the jars on the witch’s mantel again, make them all shatter and rain glass on Cosette’s dainty little shoulders.

“Is the curse the reason we can’t kiss? Are you supposed to save your affection for her?”

Her eyes go wide enough for me to assume I’ve guessed correctly.

Then her arms tighten around me like two iron bars, and suddenly I’m on my back, her hand catching my head before it hits the sand. Heat sears across my lips when she places hers over mine. It’s a rough, quick kiss that’s over before I know it’s happening. Morgen wears a triumphant smile.

“Does that answer your question?”

Her small breasts are pressed against me, her nipples hard where they touch mine. Her heart is thundering wildly, in tune with my own. I wrap my fingers up in her hair, answering her question with another kiss.

Morgen is all rough edges, but she still manages to touch my body with a lightness that contradicts the way she speaks and acts. I want to be gentle for her too, so I move slowly, stroking one hand down her spine while our breathing syncs up.

I drink up her air and soak her heat into my skin.

I take her bruised mouth into account, waiting for her lips to part for me before going any further.

We pause at the top of the moment when the tips of our tongues touch. I press my hips up, wanting to feel more of her. Her moan rumbles against my mouth, and our tongues slide past each other.

Soon our hips are rising and falling in a rhythm, our bodies creating a wave of their own.

I run a finger down her collarbone, carefully tracing the raw skin around a breakout of scales on my way down to her tit.

Her muscles tense.

“Is it ok if I keep touching you?”

“Aren’t you afraid of me?” she asks, tucking her face down so her lashes sweep against my cheek.

I reach up, catching the droplets falling from the ends of her hair. I cup the water, lighting it up with the energy we’re sharing.

“I’m the one who was sentenced to death for posing a threat to an entire kingdom. Aren’t you afraid of me?”

“No.” Morgen pushes up onto a forearm, dipping a finger into the shallow blue pond I’m holding.

I wiggle against the extra pressure of her thigh against my mound and nudge her face away with mine to kiss the column of her throat.

“We already have to keep parts of ourselves hidden from everybody else,” I say. “Let’s not hide from each other.”

She complies when I push on her shoulder, sprawling onto her back as I move down her body, stopping to swirl my thumb around her nipple before sucking it into my mouth.

I take her groan as a sign of approval and trail my tongue lower, tasting the copper of her scales and the freshwater on her pale skin. She sits up when I’m seated between her legs, watching as I push her thighs apart.

“Gwen,” she pants.

My name is a plea in her thick voice. Hearing it makes my scalp and neck tingle.

I have to bite back a smile as I part her damp curls, swiping my finger over the blush-pink skin between. I look up in time to see her eyelashes flutter. She’s wet from more than just the hot springs.

I circle her clit, trying to imitate her slow touch, but she widens her knees, looking for more. Forget the imitation—she touches herself plenty. I’m going to give her what *I* have to offer. I stroke her in quick, stiff movements, and she swells beneath my fingers.

“Yes,” she says, and I dive down, licking her inner thighs before planting a kiss on her cunt. I tuck my hair behind my ears and start

circling her clit, increasing the pressure as I make yet another ring and suck the water from her curls.

She moans and rolls her hips. I plunge my tongue down to her slit and hold her in my mouth as she falls apart. Her release comes in waves that I'm eager to lap up. She must work so hard to keep herself hidden from everyone, but here she is, bared before me.

I kneel in the sand and Morgen rocks up to sit back on her heels, her blue eyes aflame, burning through me, searching for more. Her eyelids drop heavy, and she kisses me deeply, bringing her fingers down to my core because she's not finished with me yet.

I'm already heady from the heat and the kissing, but her touch makes me feel like I'm drunk. She holds my face close to hers, our gaze locking while I teeter over the edge of my orgasm.

She catches me, keeping me close to her chest until we both catch our breath.

"We should be getting back to the ship soon," she says, breaking the embrace to stand. I'm left with my palms turned up and empty. Stretching, she looks over my naked body one more time before jumping back into the water.

The moment has ended too soon. I'd like to stay here for hours in this giddy state, but I know I can't pout about it. We have to leave. I can't demand more after she kissed me so fiercely and broke her own rules.

"Lilah did rework the schedule," I agree. "We should probably stick to it."

I dip back in to rinse off. I'm surrounded by water and thrumming with pleasure. I let my magic burst through me, remembering I don't need to hold back in front of her. The rising steam lights up in a million tiny droplets, all of them blinking and stretching into a thin web that fills the hollow.

Morgen swims over to me, closing the considerable distance she put between us.

"This is amazing." She runs her fingers through the transparent network of lights and grasps my hands. The blue glow gleams off her scales, making them appear teal. The cool tones of her hair and eyes are highlighted. "You are..."

She doesn't finish her sentence. We kick our legs, treading water, and the silence feels thicker than the humidity. Morgen starts to pull away.

There's a pattern I'm noticing—an act of intimacy followed by retreat. It's starting to make sense.

"Morgen," I whisper. "Will something horrible happen to you if you get too close to someone? If you...fall in love?"

Her eyebrows pull together.

"It would help if I didn't."

It's not a clear answer, but it leads me to a hall of doors I can look behind to find the truth.

"You don't have to worry about that with me at least." The crease between her eyebrows deepens. "That was the other thing the man in the mirror prophesied—I'm not destined to know that sort of love."

"It's hard for me to trust the opinion of a man imprisoned in a mirror," she snorts. "He should have seen his future and found a way to avoid such misfortune."

"I know you don't believe in his prophecies, but I've met him, and I do."

"Then you believe what Grimhilde fears—that you could be a real threat?"

"I believe I could be, but I have a choice in how I wield my power. I don't get to decide who loves me," I answer. "We can do this without worrying about any of those messy matters of the heart."

"Then we'll uphold our agreement and end this once we get to Gentrilly," she says.

"Right. Nothing changes," I agree. "Only now we can keep each other's secrets for a while." I touch the highest visible scale. "And I can help you."

I close my eyes and try to feel the curse beneath her skin, but dark magic fights back. It lashes at my light like a whip. I flinch when it prickles through my palms and up my arms.

"You don't need to try," she says. "It's enough that you know."

She unlocks her hands from mine and sinks beneath the water before I can insist. I've met stubborn curses before, but hers doesn't budge a bit. Not even while I'm at full strength.

Morgen's figure is a blur as she swims up to the small beach. She swipes her long limbs with her undershirt to dry off, letting her hair fall over her face to shield herself when she catches me watching her.

"You didn't bring your clothes," she states.

“I didn’t think I needed to. Skye and Amelia stripped down and got right in.”

She frowns. “Stay right there.”

She angles herself between the falls and the rocky hillside to keep dry as she walks through. Moments later, she comes back with one of Amelia’s linen towels and my gown hanging over her arm.

“They all saw me when I got in the water. You didn’t have to do that,” I say, climbing to meet her. I pull the dress over my head, and she spins me around, tying the laces for me. She makes a bow and brings her hand to rest on the back of my neck.

“I know,” she says, pressing close to me. “But maybe I don’t want to share the sight of you with anyone else when you’re mine for such a short time.”

She turns and goes through the narrow passage, slipping through. I follow her around the tight bank, soaking the hem of my skirt.

Everyone else is already fully clothed and ready to go. Skye wraps an arm over Jacques’ shoulder. I can’t hear what they whisper, but it makes Jacques blush. Amelia slips something she found into Morgen’s hands. No one comments on how much time we spent alone in the hollow.

“I believe a rematch is in order.” Skye touches my arm as they pass me. “I won’t let you win next time.”

“And I won’t hold back to spare your feelings,” I laugh.

Morgen glances back, her lips quirking up for a fraction of a second before she’s back to discussing itineraries with Amelia and Skye.

The cold air of the village market permeates my clothing, but it doesn’t seep into my skin. I’m still radiating warmth from the captain’s touch and the way she wrapped me up for her eyes only. I stomp my feet with Jacques to keep the blood flowing while everyone else disperses to the stalls to make their purchases.

Scents of fried dough and charred meats make the wind seem less bitter than it is. Even my appetite doesn’t bother me right now. I’m satiated, full of pleasure and smooth, contented energy. Full of Morgen’s secrets and a new use for my magic. I pull my jacket tight to shield myself from a strong gust.

Something bumps up against my shoulder. Morgen’s arm. Her firm muscles flex when she holds a small package between us.

“This is for you.” Oil blots through the brown wrapper she places in my hands. “Since I kept you from your session with Cook this morning, and you helped with digging up the jars. I owe you.”

I peel back the paper and a dusting of powdered sugar puffs up from the package. I pull off a bit of the fried dough inside. It’s still hot, but I take a big bite anyways, loving how the butter and overly sweet sugar spread across my tongue. It tastes even better because I haven’t had anything this good in weeks.

“Mmm.” I break off another piece. “Here, you have to share it with me.”

Morgen’s eyes drop to the pastry then right back to my mouth. She licks her lips.

“I never eat sweets,” she says and heads toward the docks. “It’s all yours. Just make sure you finish it before we get back. I don’t want the others to think I’m favoring you.”

I lick the sugar from my fingertips and smile, splitting the rest with Jacques. It’s all gone by the time we pile into the rowboat.

My hands are sore and the weather nips at my ears and nose. I’m crammed between Jacques and Skye, and my gown is freezing around my ankles. But I feel comfortable, aglow with Morgen’s favor, even if she won’t acknowledge it. Even if our agreement is only temporary.

She might get a nice payment from my mother, but I want to thank her in my own way for keeping me safe. I want to keep her crew from losing her when she becomes something monstrous.

I study the collar of her jacket, thinking about the scales beneath.

How much time do the pirates aboard *The Ruined Soul* have left with her before she starts hunting them down? As soon as I close myself off in Morgen’s cabin, I’m going to start working on a way to break her curse.

MORGEN

“Your time would be better spent practicing your Gentrillian or learning court customs,” I tell Snow as she repeats yet another incantation to work against my curse.

I watch her kneel at my desk in her white nightgown. She’s arranged glasses and candles in a makeshift altar next to my ledgers and accounting records. I’ve allowed it to happen, just as I’ve allowed her to make some excuse to curl up beside me on the floor each night.

“Those lessons bore me,” she says, lighting a scrap of paper over a candle’s flame. “Besides, they speak the common language in Gentrilly, and I hope my mother will be so overjoyed to see me alive that she’ll forgive my flawed court presentation.”

Queen Isobel used her daughter as a bargaining chip. I haven’t shared my thoughts on that matter with Snow, but I’ve been encouraging her to approach her mother’s court with caution.

“Personally, I think my time is best spent on essential tasks such as brewing marshmallow tea for sore throats and breaking strange curses,” she continues when I don’t reassure her that her mother’s love will mend everything.

“Maybe so, but some troubles can’t be fixed.”

It is enough that she knows my secret. It’s no small miracle that she guessed it when no one else has ever gotten close to discovering the dark magic locked in my soul. If anything, the path to the end feels less lonely.

“You need to keep the faith,” she says. “Don’t you ever pray to your gods?”

Faith is dangerous for me. Hope leads to resistance, and resisting an inevitable outcome will only make things worse. I lean back against the wall, trying to give her enough space and privacy for her nightly ceremony. I like to watch as she prays for the safety of her friends and the guard who hurt her. I never partake in the ritual.

“No.”

“Rituals and prayer can be soothing. It’s like handing your troubles over to a greater power.”

“If the gods have such great power, then why do they demand so much from those of us who are down here dry-humping our way through life without any gifts of our own? Why don’t they just help us out?”

“*Morgen.*” She presses her hand to her mouth to stifle a chuckle. “I always feel better after speaking to the Goddess. There must be something you believe in.”

“There are plenty of things that make me feel better.” I hold up a hand and count my fingers. “Fishing, drinking, swordplay, bedsport.”

She casts a reproachful glance back at me.

The time I spend with her is a balm to my frayed nerves, but I don’t mention that. Maybe that’s what I believe in—the enchantment of our hours in bed, how the rest of the world disappears when we’re entwined with each other. There’s a meditative quality to our arrangement.

I rub my shoulder and feel the scaly patch curving around my scapula and catch the thought in time to turn it around.

“Beautiful women and the deep blue sea. That’s my religion,” I murmur.

“That’s something,” she says and blows out the candles. She crawls to me, her shoulders and hips moving like a cat’s, the fabric of her nightgown shifting under the pale starlight.

She places her hands on my thighs, and I melt beneath her touch, ready to forget all of my troubles when she rises up on her knees to cradle my face close to her chest.

Yes, I suppose this is religion.

I have the ribbons of her gown between my teeth when I hear the distinct knocks my first mate uses. The two quick raps startle both of us out of the moment. She pulls back, and the top of the gown opens. I catch her with a hand on her low back.

“It’s ok,” I tell her, watching the whites of her eyes shine in the dark. “It’s only Skye.”

I listen for a few moments. There are no signs of shouting or late-night fights that need to be handled, but Skye never comes around without a good reason.

I re-lace Snow’s gown and smooth the skirt over her thigh.

“I need to speak with them. Tuck in under the covers.”

“I’m sure they assume,” she starts. The rest of the argument dances on the tip of her tongue, but she closes her mouth with a hum and climbs into bed while I dress.

The crew can assume what they like about us, but I won’t give anyone a solid reason to gossip or disrespect Snow. Her position will be scrutinized enough as it is in Gentrilly. A history of playing mistress to a rakish pirate captain will only make things harder for her at the palace.

Buttoning my jacket, I meet Skye on the deck. They’re gripping a spyglass so hard that their leather gloves are straining at the knuckles.

“What is it?” I ask, but I see the torches aglow in the distance and move to step around my first mate to get a better look. The ship is a moving shadow that takes up a decent chunk of the horizon. Warships of that size can only mean one thing. “Which navy is after us?”

“Lavinsar’s Royal Navy.”

“Have you alerted anyone else?”

“No, Captain. Griff spied it, and Lilah was with me when we confirmed the banners, but we’re waiting for you to give your orders. Should we keep moving?”

If we were traveling in one of my agile sloops, I’d say yes, but *The Ruined Soul* was built to endure battles—not run from them.

“They’d only send more ships after us,” I say grimly.

“Do you want me to rouse the gunners?” Their weight shifts from side to side. They see something I don’t, but they won’t make a suggestion outright. Soon they will need to make these kinds of calls, and I need them to be ready for that day.

“What would you do if you were in charge? Would you be prepping the cannons and readying the crew for battle?”

“Yes,” they answer, but they’re still fidgeting with the damn spyglass.

“What else?”

“I’d be open to negotiations, considering the damage that behemoth is capable of.” They lift their grey eyes and cock their head to the side. “But I’m not in your shoes, and I’m sure there are certain things you’re not willing to negotiate for personal reasons.”

“Personal reasons,” I echo, recalling the sensation of Snow’s hands on my thighs. “Do you think they know Snow is with us?”

“They either know it or would be very interested to learn that information.”

“Fuck.” I sheathe my heart in ice, freezing it from meddling in my mind’s affairs. I need to take action. Now. “Fly the white flags. I’m open to negotiation.”

“Yes, Captain.” Skye usually goes along with my most brazen orders without blinking an eye, but now I can hear the tremor of a question in their voice. “Are you sure? Snow will be in danger if—”

“Tell the gunners to load their weapons and gather a small crew of our best fighters to stand by.”

I’m firm with the order. We can’t outrun Lavinsar’s navy. Nor can we destroy one of their warships. Not without extensive damage that would delay us even further.

And my time is running out.

Standing at the base of the lookout post, I see Lavinsar’s flags cutting through the clear night. Silver moon phases glitter against black backdrops, rippling so rapidly that it looks as though the lunar cycle is speeding through at an unnatural pace.

We must be prepared for anything from them. And my heart doesn’t get a say in how to proceed.

Griff is already halfway down from the crow’s nest when I shout up to him.

“Get Amelia and tell her to roll out the barrels!”

His mouth quirks up. “It’s time?”

I nod curtly. “It’s time.”

Sampson rushes to meet him, catching him as his boots hit the deck. “You don’t have to do this,” he tells Griff. “But I won’t stop you.” He pulls him tightly in a one-armed embrace, letting the lantern swing by his side.

I race back to my cabin and the treasure Lavinsar is sure to be searching for.

The sand in the hourglass is slipping away. I must act for my own benefit, as I've always done. I try to shut off my desire to keep Gwen safe before I go back into the room.

This is what I get for treating our time together as something sacred when I should have left the last of those emotions in that hollow.



I'M ONLY SECURING my bag of gold, I remind myself as I toss Snow a robe. This is about the money.

"Are we walking the deck at this time of night?" she asks uneasily, unfolding the velvet.

"We're about to be boarded by Lavinsar's navy."

Her mouth clicks apart. She's looking to me for assurance that everything will be fine, but I can't give that to her.

"Should I hide?"

There's nowhere to hide her. If they're looking for her, they'll send scouts and divers over to dig through the ship. That's what I would do. If someone stole her from under my nose, I'd be tearing shit apart until I found her.

I pull a slouchy wool hat over her hair.

"No, you're coming with me." Tension seems to melt from her shoulders the moment I take her under my arm. She trusts me so easily. A fissure threads through the wall of ice in my chest. "Just go along with what I say."

"Morgen," she pleads, seeking an explanation. "What is going to happen?"

"I don't know. But if it all goes to shit, don't let them take you alive."

I've heard tales of Lavinsar's temple dungeons. The High Priestess might have ordered a swift death for Snow once, but there's no telling how she'll handle the insult of her pet running away.

"I won't." Her agreement comes fast. Too fast. She knows better than I do what happens to enemies of the coven. "She'll punish me for this."

"No," I vow without thinking—a spur-of-the-moment promise to uphold our deal. "She won't. You're mine until Gentrilly. No one else is putting their hands on you without consequence."

She softens a bit again. I try to keep my mind on anything but her, feeling the steady rhythm of my sword against my thigh as I walk, measuring the shrinking distance between Lavinsar's ship and *The Ruined Soul*. I hear myself issuing cut-and-dry orders, my brain and mouth working together mechanically.

"Captain." One of my gunners is waiting on the deck. He shifts his shotgun on its strap and scratches at the dark brown curls peeking from beneath his hat. "Should we flank you as they board?"

"Not unless I give the signal for you to act." My father taught me that power is an illusion. Whoever boards this ship needs to see that I'm in control without needing to hold the reins too tightly. "But I'll take a chair."

I need more time and a distraction to even the odds of this half-baked scheme. I need to keep Snow close.

I look at her, shivering and breathing into her collar for warmth. I could wrap an arm around her and pull her into my lap, confirming everything the crew suspects. It would be a great show to put on for Lavinsar's navy—to treat their runaway priestess as my plaything. I'd certainly enjoy the comfort of her weight on my thighs.

But even with my shields up, I can't do that to her.

I have a legacy to leave behind. I won't go down in history as the pirate who kept the would-be princess as a lowly mistress, and I won't see her debased in front of representatives from a kingdom that turned on her.

"Bruce, bring me another chair." I plop down in the seat and drum my fingers on the armrest. "And something to eat."

By the time he brings the other chair, the small group Skye rallied has gathered behind me. Cook strides up, carrying a plate of biscuits smeared with jam.

"Here, Captain."

"These are for you," I tell Snow, passing the food to her. "Take a seat."

"Shouldn't Skye be at your side?" she asks, unable to mask her concern.

"Skye knows where they need to stand."

I lower my voice to speak to Bruce as the boards are placed between the ships. "Climb to the crow's nest and watch their port side canons."

"Where's Griff?" he asks, watching as Sampson paces alongside the rails.

"He's rolling out the barrels," I tell him.

He chuckles softly. “For fuck’s sake. That is...”

“Foolish? Unlikely to work? Maybe so.” I shrug. We’ve only ever discussed this plan half-jokingly while completely drunk. “But it’s our best option. Tell Sampson to calm down or he’ll give us away.”

Snow is still standing as he jogs off. Her hands are shaking so hard she’s about to drop the plate. The lanterns throw light on our first visitor’s face as he climbs onto the deck.

“Sit,” I whisper. “Don’t let this man see that you’re frightened. It’ll only give him more power.”

“But I don’t know what’s going on.”

“There’s no time to explain. Do you trust me?”

She takes the seat next to me. “Yes.”

“Good, then keep trusting me and eat your snack.”

I hope my words get through to her because the whole group from Lavinsar has arrived. Heavy boots sound on the boards behind the officer at the front of the formation.

“Make way for Admiral Daniels,” a deep-voiced guard calls out the introduction.

They’ve sent a fucking admiral after us. He’s a thin, hawkish man peering through the spectacles that slip down his nose. It’s a wonder his bicorn hat doesn’t slip off his head as he looks down on us. His silver and black coat drips with ribbons and regalia, a sure sign that he’s seen his fair share of bloody battles. He’s approaching his elder years, but it would be a mistake to underestimate his strength.

Harri was roughly his age, and he had plenty of fight left in him. My stomach squirms. Harri would know how to keep this plan moving along.

No, Harri would hand Snow over right away, I remind myself before any regret can creep in.

A saber shines on the admiral’s hip, its handle untarnished. I’m sure the weapon serves as decoration when he has two large guards standing just behind him—a man and woman who look like they could be twins with their cropped brown hair and tanned white skin. Their suits of armor are opalescent, taking on a golden sheen beneath the firelight. White cloaks flutter around their calves.

Snow makes a strangled noise of recognition.

They aren’t with Lavinsar’s navy; they’re straight from the Moon Coven temple. They each take two steps in opposite directions, parting the

way for the elderly woman standing between them. Her shoulders are draped with white furs, and a lace hood is pulled over her forehead.

They've brought a priestess.

"How nice to have such prestigious visitors at this time of night," I drawl, crossing my ankle over my thigh. "What can I do for you? We have several barrels of rum available for purchase if your sailors are thirsty."

That wipes the smirk off the admiral's face.

"You know what we're here for," he says. "It has come to our attention that Gwendolyn of the servant blues, the would-be heir to the Gentrillian throne has taken shelter on your ship. This is a breach of the peace treaty. Not complying with our demands is an open act of defiance against the Kingdom of Lavinsar."

The Moon Coven guard to his left has his eyes fixed on Snow. "You're in the presence of a senior snow white. You should be standing."

Her face has gone pale, and dried crumbs stick to her lips. I flip my hand open on the armrest and she places hers in mine.

"If she is, in fact, a runaway from your temple, then why should she stand for you? She was born to be a princess, after all."

"Those titles were stripped long ago, and Gwendolyn never completed her trials," the admiral replies. "Maribelle of the snow whites is her superior."

"Even so, such rankings hold no power on my ship." I curl my fingers tightly around Snow's. "My matey stands for no one."

There's a collective intake of breath, a wave of shock that passes through my crew. Claiming a matey is as good as being wed in the eyes of the sea gods. Gwen won't be written off as my mistress—she'll be known as my equal. It's not a lofty position, but it's not one without power either. The high seas have their own laws, and I have my own means of distraction.

"Why didn't you tell me you were on the run, my love?" I muse.

Snow's eyes look even larger than usual with all of her hair tucked away. "Oh, I um..."

"We were told the would-be princess was killed by her lover back in Lavinsar," Jacques pipes up as she flounders for an answer. Bless him for trying to play along. "How could she be on our ship?"

The priestess sweeps forward and braces her hands on her knees as she stoops to speak to Snow.

“We were all horrified when we thought you’d been murdered. Imagine the High Priestess’ relief when the man in the mirror showed her that you’re alive and well.” Her smile widens, but the expression never quite reaches her watery blue eyes. “We don’t know why the guard lied to us about your death, but she’s been taken care of.”

Snow’s fingers go limp in my hand. I squeeze them, willing her to be ok.

I only need a little more time.

“Taken care of?” Snow asks quietly. Her words are nearly carried away by the breeze.

“Oh yes, sweet girl. You know how much your High Priestess loves you. She wouldn’t let the guard go unpunished.” Maribelle reaches out to touch the pink mark on Snow’s neck.

“Fingers off of her,” I snap, and she recoils.

“But Shiloh told me everything. She told me that Grimhilde wanted me dead.”

“She only told you that because she was jealous that you were committing yourself to the Goddess.” She raises a wrinkled hand to stroke Snow’s cheek, but I glare at her and she drops it immediately. “The guard was too much of a coward to tell you the truth, but she confessed the whole thing to us.”

A sudden squall cuts through the calm night, lifting the edge of the priestess’ hood to reveal her fine white hair.

“Shiloh was brave,” Snow says. “She was honest and kind. I don’t believe you.”

Please be ok. Just a few minutes longer.

“Gwendolyn.” Her patronizing tone takes an aggressive edge. “Put an end to this madness at once. We came to see you home safely. Don’t you miss the temple?”

“I thought I would, but I’m happier here than I ever was at the temple.” She lifts our clasped hands and kisses the top of mine. “I’m staying with my matey.”

The words sound so good to me, like Gwen was always meant to call me hers. Like we were meant to be the kind of mateys who watch the sunrise on the horizon together each morning and shield one another from the world around us.

I've never wanted anything so badly in my life. I've never wanted anything at all.

Panic coils tight around me, making it hard for my ribs to fully expand.

It's only a diversion. I'm only securing a reward for my troubles.

Maribelle's fake concern drops away. "Oh, you silly girl. Don't you know she keeps a wench in just about every dirty port there is?"

Snow looks around. "I don't see any of them sitting here at her side. I'm staying," she repeats.

"I wanted to spare your feelings, pet, but it looks like we'll have to go about this the hard way." She motions to Admiral Daniels. "Say your piece."

"When we saw the white flags, we assumed there would be a negotiation on the table," he says. "We've brought gifts to show our goodwill since this is a delicate political matter."

He snaps his fingers and one of the guards comes forward, dropping the basket she's holding at my feet. It's filled to the brim with glass bottles and apples that look so fresh some of them still have vibrant green leaves on the stems. This bounty could fetch a fortune in the barren lands.

"Now that you know what we're looking to purchase, you can name your price," he says. The priestess pats her furs, looking entirely too satisfied by this display of wealth. "But just so you know, our cannons are pointed directly at your sails. The outcome of this arrangement depends on your cooperation."

I brace my back against the chair. I can't check behind me. I can only try to buy more time for Griff and Amelia and hope the plan will work out.

"One-hundred thousand roscles," I state, pulling the number from the top of my head.

It's an excessive sum, one I'm hoping to barter down. The captain rocks back on his heels and pushes his spectacles up his nose.

"That seems fair, considering we must buy your silence."

I'm searching for a reward, and I've just been offered one that I can't justify turning down. I'm running out of time and ways to spin the truth so that I convince myself that this journey is all about my wants. My needs.

If this is a test, then I am failing.

The admiral claps his hands and calls for the guards. Maribelle snickers, gloating at Snow's distress as she pulls on my arm. They both march across the deck, lifting Snow from her chair by the shoulders. She twists her neck trying to put herself in my line of vision.

"Morgen," she pleads, but I can't look. I can't answer her.

And yet, my fingers stroke the handle of my blade as the guards move closer—my heart and my body forgetting everything I've trained my mind for the second Gwen is in danger.

Hurry up, damn it.

An orange ball of light slides across the surface of the admiral's spectacles, a flame soaring past his eyes.

Finally.

I move my hand between Snow's shoulders on instinct, forcing her to duck down with me.

"HIT THE DECK!" Lilah shouts, bounding down the steps along with the five seamen accompanying her. Her gloves are singed from the rum bottles she lit and launched. If they hit the spilled barrels of explosives like I'm hoping, then there's no time to make sense of anything.

A blast rocks through the ship on the heels of a deafening explosion. Heat rises in a flash, and everything devolves into chaos. My ears are ringing as I lift my head, coughing. Jacques has his body angled over Snow's chair. Sampson clutches Griff as he lets go of the rope he used to propel himself over from the warship. Amelia is sputtering, grappling over the side of the ship to take Lilah's hand.

Sampson mouths to his lover, "You did it."

We did it. They made it out alive.

"Lift the anchor," Amelia chokes out. "We need to get away before the fire reaches us." A gunshot sounds from above. Bruce is taking care of the naval gunners. Sailors from Lavinsar's ship plunge off the side of the boat to escape the flames, disappearing in the smoky night. The ship quakes again as a cannonball goes through the mizzenmast and hits the water.

Fuck. Another thing that will need repairing. I steady my thoughts. We can fix the sail. Bruce won't let that gunner live for long.

The admiral is clawing at the deck, trying to get on his feet while the Moon Coven guards focus on helping their priestess up. I step on the cuff of his jacket, delighting in how he pretends he's not afraid of me.

“Did the man in the mirror forget to tell you that I have two former members of your royal navy in my employ?” I ask, speaking above the rapport of gunfire. “That they were top explosive masters before your High Priestess made them her enemies?” I push away from the chair. Skye kicks it aside and flocks to the open space beside Snow. She’s guarded on both sides now.

My crew is moving to protect her without instruction. Pride swells in my chest. For a second it looks like such a pretty picture, a perfect moment—the people I care about most rushing to take care of each other.

But it’s only an image. It’s not real. I can’t hold onto it.

This is all about my legacy. My name will live on in infamy long after I’m gone. It has nothing to do with them.

“Did you think there was a price you could pay to take her from me?” I scoop an apple from the basket and take my knife out. “That I’d let you lock her up in that tower until she became a pile of bones herself in exchange for a fucking fruit basket?”

The priestess watches the apple bounce in my palm, malice flashing in her eyes.

I turn the fruit over, looking for any flaws or signs of rot. It looks normal to me, and I don’t think one can easily poison apples. Still, it’s better safe than sorry. I cut into it, revealing the crisp white flesh beneath the red skin.

“It is a pretty gift though. Why don’t you take the first bite?” I hold the slice out for the priestess. She presses her lips together, and I touch the fruit to the seam of her mouth. “Not a fan of apples?” Her nostrils flare. “Or is there something wrong with the basket you brought me?”

“Maribelle. Priestess, *no*.” One of the guards plucks the apple slice from my hand and pops it into her mouth. She chews slowly. My nerves are splitting and fraying over the thought of everything going wrong when I’m so close to the end. I’m being paranoid. Nothing is happening.

I lift the fruit to my mouth, hesitating as the guard’s jaw stops working. She blinks tears away, her armor clanking as her legs shake violently.

“Umphhh.” She claws at herself, raking her fingernails down the column of her neck, leaving deep gauges in her wake. The flesh beneath her eyes sinks in and her cheeks begin to hollow out. She’s withering away before our eyes—her hair turning grey and falling out in clumps. She rasps

as her lips pucker and wrinkle into non-existence until she's a skeleton beneath a stretched layer of waxen skin, rattling in her boots.

She falls to the deck. All of her flesh is gone. She's a pile of bones in a guard's uniform.

"A strange gift indeed," I say. "Good thing I have plenty to go around." I turn to Admiral Daniels. "Would you like some too?"

He keeps a wide stance. He's too proud to cower in front of a bunch of pirates. The remaining guard places himself in front of the priestess.

"You must understand that we had to ensure your silence. If this distorted version of the truth gets back to Queen Isobel, then the war will start anew. Think of the destruction, the lives that will be lost. This matter is bigger than all of us," the admiral says. The reflection of the wreckage blots out his eyes. "It was nothing personal."

"Ah, but you came for me and mine, and that does make it personal. What do I care if those two shrews want to crush the world between them so long as we make it out all right?" I latch onto my anger, letting my cruelty sharpen its claws and tear my softer yearnings to shreds. "The way I see it, we need to ensure *your* silence."

"I'm prepared to die if it means the terms of the peace treaty are honored." His eyes fall on Snow.

"She's a person, not a paragraph in a contract she never signed." I raise my blade, claiming the upper hand before the admiral can.

He reaches for his saber but makes no move to unsheathe it. Instead, he only lifts two fingers from the handle. I realize his subterfuge too late. The guard is already charging toward Snow, swinging his sword ferociously.

The lanterns sway, glinting off his armor as he goes for Jacques first. The guard stays on the attack, thrusting and trying to move past Skye and Jacques' line of defense. Their blades clash, and the admiral pulls a smug smile.

"It's been a while since I had a decent match. Let's see what you've got," he says, drawing his weapon, but I spin away from him before he can land a blow. I have another target in mind. I know where the guard's loyalty truly lies.

I grip Maribelle of the snow whites around the waist and hold her in front of me. I drop my sword and press my knife to her throat.

Her gasping breath is enough to catch the guard's attention. He pivots, losing his focus. "No."

The distraction is enough. Jacques and Skye move to hold the boundary around Snow's body, and the cabin boy, Rhys, charges out from behind the steps, slicing his sword straight through the guard's neck.

A head rolls on the deck, landing upright so it looks as though his rounded mouth is still shouting in protest.

"I'm sorry you had to see that, my lady," Jacques says. Rhys kneels before Snow's seat in some odd show of respect that I don't fully understand. The boy isn't even Gentrillian, but he's pledging fealty to her.

I brace myself, expecting Snow to scream at the sight, but she looks at the guard's fallen body and sinks her teeth into her biscuit.

Gods. There's no doubt in my mind that she'd be the woman for me if things were different. If we hadn't both been forced into agreements made without our consent.

I press the blade against the priestess' neck to stop my mind from wandering.

"Take her and the admiral to the holding cell," I tell Skye, who's patting Snow's shoulder.

"You cannot hold me," Maribelle laughs. "You won't get away with this. The man in the mirror will find you. You will all be hunted and taken back to the temple to pay for your crimes. I'll make sure that you get to witness everything the High Priestess wants to do with Gwendolyn's bones."

"Suit yourself, then." I muster up all of my strength as I lunge for the railing, throwing her over the side.

She screams as she plunges into the dark depths, her cry piercing the night before being silenced by the ocean. I lift a shoulder to swipe at the hot, prickling itch creeping up my neck.

"So what will it be, Daniels?" I ask the Admiral, picking up another apple. "Do you want the apple or the holding cell?"

He backs up, looking like he's thinking about throwing himself overboard. The bump in his throat bobs as he whispers, "The cell."

"A wise choice." I wave to my first mate. "Skye?"

"I've got him." They bind the Admiral's wrists and turn back to me once they've got him in their grip. Their silvery hair swings around their shoulders. "Maybe next time give me a heads up when you've taken a matey. I'd at least have gotten you a better fruit basket."

“Ha.” I roll my eyes, and they land on Snow. She’s still shivering in her seat and licking the jam from her fingertips.

I want to pick her up and carry her back to my quarters. A blanket and her warm body sound delightful right now.

“Morgen, can we go back to your cabin?” she asks, staring at my neck. I scratch the spot. It feels raw and scabbed against my nails. I press my palm over the fresh scales to soothe the broken skin, remembering the curse.

I straighten the collar of my jacket, concealing the new breakout. I can’t go back with her and forget my reality, my doom.

“Jacques will take you back. I need to speak with Lilah before Lavinsar sends more ships after us.”

I walk away from her, watching the flames lick across the horizon as we sail on.

MORGEN

I delay returning to my cabin, waiting until the orange glow of the fire is consumed by the rising sun before I even consider resting.

My heart rate hasn't settled since I saw the warship coming after us. I'm scratching at myself like I can peel off the scales and crawl out of my uncomfortable skin. I'm making a mess of my own emotions. It's getting harder and harder to justify my actions. I feel like I'm on trial in the underworld trying to make decisions that would have seemed so simple a mere month ago.

And only one thing has changed in that time frame.

If Snow is asleep, then I can lie down for an hour without worrying about another test of my resolve. That's all I really need—some time to fix the cracks in my walls and remember what's at stake.

But she's wide awake and waiting for me, sitting on the edge of my desk with candles lit all around her. Wax drips over the sconces, and bay leaves curl with smoke on a ceramic plate.

A quilt is thrown over the vanity mirror.

"I'm sorry," she says and fingers the stitching of the fabric. Her eyelashes cast long shadows over her cheeks that are streaked and shining with tears. "I should have known she'd use the man in the mirror to find me. I could have gotten us all killed. All of those sailors from Lavinsar—it's my fault."

"None of this is your fault." Fuck. I've only been in the room for ten seconds, and I'm already tossing my plan aside over the sight of a few tears. "They would have just as happily murdered us all and taken you

back to be tortured. I doubt a simple death would've satisfied her when she put so much effort into bringing you back in one piece."

"I know."

"And your guard..."

Her dark eyes are liquid in the dim light. "I'm not ready to talk about Shiloh just yet."

Her voice is so small, so quiet. All I can do is try to change the subject.

"Do you think that's enough to stop him from spying on us?" I point my chin at the covered mirror.

"I don't know," she sighs. "I've been chanting banishment spells for hours now. Hopefully he stays away."

"We're rerouting anyway," I tell her. "Lavinsar's battleships aren't allowed within a certain distance of Sarteal's borders. We should be safe if we skirt the coastline."

"We'll be traveling close to the nightmare realm?"

Sarteal's history is twisted deeply with dark magic. The kingdom has earned the fearsome nickname. "Yes. It'll add some time to the trip, but we can't pull another trick like that with Lavinsar's fleet. They'll be prepared for it."

"I don't mind if it takes us a year to get to Gentrilly."

I wouldn't either, but I don't have a year. Sand is slipping steadily in the hourglass next to her hip.

"It should only take a couple weeks."

She swirls her fingers through the water in her teacup and hops down. "Then I'll have to work extra hard to help you. Here, let me take a look at your new scales."

I should protest, but the eruption itches like the underworld, and I've gotten used to her soothing touch. I take my jacket off, and she slips her damp hands to the collar of my blouse, undoing it slowly, trailing her fingers under the cord of my necklace and over the broken skin until I feel the familiar tingle of her magic.

"That priestess—Maribelle, she couldn't do anything like this, could she?" I tense as the cool sensation penetrates the prickling pain running down my shoulder. "Or should I worry that she'll float back up on some magical wave, looking for revenge?"

She snuffles out a laugh and pulls my blouse off completely to search for any more signs of my transformation.

“No, I don’t even think she could swim,” she says. “This probably sounds awful, but I felt nothing when she went overboard. I knew her my whole life, surely I should have felt something.”

“Was she kind to you?”

Her hands sweep over my shoulder blades. My body wants to soften from the touch, but I can’t allow it.

“She used to make me scrape her corns whenever it was my turn to wash the priestess’ feet in moon water .”

“Ack.” I grimace at the unwelcome image.

“She wasn’t fond of me. I could tell she enjoyed delivering the news of...” An unformed word stays caught in her throat. “No, none of the priestesses really liked me. They were all upset when Grimhilde named me to take Seraphine of the snow white’s spot after she passed. But it didn’t matter what they thought; the High Priestess’ word is law. Every position in the moon coven is meant to serve her power.”

“And how is she the only one with so much power?” It’s an easy topic to fill the silence. I’m still not accustomed to showing these parts of myself to anyone. I feel vulnerable in a way I never have before when she studies my marks. “Aside from you.”

“Each lifetime, the coven votes for one person to become the vessel for the Moon Goddess’ power. *As the Goddess stole back her light from the God of Night and shared it with the human realm, the High Priestess shares her gifts with those willing to accept them,*” she quotes from the Moon Coven texts.

“Wasn’t there some political ordeal with that vote? Wasn’t King Rain’s devout son selected to become the priest, merging Moon Coven and palace interests?”

“I always forget about that. I think most people do.” The velvet of her robe brushes my skin, and I feel her breath at the base of my neck. “It’s hard to imagine anyone but Grimhilde in that role. But yes, the prince was meant to wear the crown of bones before he was killed in the battle of Farselay and the ceasefire was called.” She sounds like she’s reciting a passage from a history book, but it’s the event that changed the course of her life. *An heir for an heir.*

“Strange how she wanted you out of her way once she realized how powerful you could be. And the man who was meant to inherit the power she coveted wound up dead.”

“A coincidence. It has to be,” she says. “She was far away when the prince was slain.”

“Just like it was a coincidence that she went to war with Queen Isobel—the woman she wanted and couldn’t have. She’s a glorified hag out for blood.”

Her hands stop moving around my ribs.

I wait for her to respond to my harsh words about the High Priestess, but she only draws in a breath and holds it. Her magic shifts into something colder. It’s nearly painful in the same way ice can be when it sits for too long on an injury. She’s reaching deeply like she can soothe my emotions along with my aching wounds.

I let myself get swept up in the blissful numbness, but then she swipes a finger across the small of my back, and every nerve inside me draws up tightly. She’s never inspected me so thoroughly before.

“What is this?” She presses on the scars between the scales. The last time I studied my back in the mirror they were pale pink. The memory of the searing pain never faded the way the raw strips of broken flesh did. “These aren’t part of an eruption. Who did this to you?”

“My father.” The look in his hazel eyes was always worse than the flogging itself. He struggled so hard to make things right. He’d weep to see how I’ve been wasting his efforts lately.

“Is that why you killed him?” she asks softly, reaching on the desk to rewet her fingers.

“No, I killed him because he asked me to. He was sick, and someone had to take his place as Captain.” I close my eyes, trying not to remember the weight of the sharp knife in my hand or the warm spray of blood on my face when he gurgled his last breath. “He wasn’t cruel at heart, but I was a difficult child. When I lived with my grandparents I was always in trouble for doing things like smuggling orphaned kittens into my room to nurse with eye droppers filled with milk. Sometimes I’d wander home late after feeding the ducks. I’d get sent to bed without supper for my insolence, but my father knew my weakness would be my downfall if he didn’t intervene with harsher methods of discipline.”

The limits of my curse stop me from discussing how he sought to drive the softness from my heart and make me ruthless.

“He knew?”

I can only dip my chin, but I'm dying to tell her everything. None of this was my doing. The only choice I've ever been given is between the jars and the scales.

"In his own twisted way, it's how he showed me how much he loved me."

"That's not love," she says, and my irritation rises. He tried. The moment he learned of my existence, he came to fetch me from my cushy life with my grandparents so he could turn me into the wretched thing I am today. He realized the horrible mistake he'd made with the sea witch and made me unbreakable so that I could keep my soul. In a world full of people who would have done nothing, Ronan tried to make amends in the only way he knew how. And a few hours ago, I nearly blew it all. My cruelty snaps back into place, a familiar friend that holds me together when my walls feel like they might break.

"And what do you know of love?" I reach for my top and step back, covering my breasts as I face her. "Was it love when your mother handed you to her worst enemy, knowing how likely you were to be abused or killed? Was it love when your High Priestess called you one of her own and then ordered your death? Was it love when your guard pressed the blade to your throat?"

She doesn't react until I mention the guard, then her face starts to crumble, and my heart falls along with it.

I pull her to me, stroking my hand over her hair.

"I'm sorry," I tell her as she sobs against my chest. The phrase feels strange on my tongue, but I can't stop the apology from bubbling out of my mouth. "I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

She circles her arms around my waist, clinging tighter to me, not pushing me away.

"I try to tell myself that my mother and Grimhilde only acted in the interest of the realm, but I always wonder why they couldn't have protected me in the process." Her tears soak through the scrap of fabric between us. "I make no excuses for them, but Shiloh was different. You have to understand; she swore a vow."

I don't understand. If I could share that kind of intimacy with a person without risking the very core of my being, I would do anything to protect them. Vows be damned. What is the point of holding any power, of having immense strength, if it's not wielded to keep the ones you care about safe?

“Shiloh always listened to me like she was actually interested when the other guards seemed vaguely annoyed by my presence. I wanted her to like me,” she says. “It was reckless to use my magic in front of her, but I wanted to impress her. So stupid of me. That part *is* my fault. She was sworn to protect Grimhilde and the temple, but she didn’t—” Her speech is stuttered by a ragged breath. “She didn’t go through with it in the end. She might have pressed the blade to my throat, but something stopped her from going any further. She’d be alive if she’d just followed orders.”

“Don’t tell yourself that. The High Priestess was always going to use her as an alibi. Your guard had to have known it.” I press my lips to the top of her head. “You’re right. She stopped herself. She let you get away.”

And I’m so glad she did. If she’d only pressed the blade a little further, the papers mourning the would-be princess would be true. I’d have balled the pamphlet of the moon-crowned woman up and stuffed it in my pocket, never knowing the true Gwendolyn and her light, her warmth, her magic.

“So you see, she might not have loved me in that way, but she did *have* love for me.” She lifts her tear-streaked face, and I cup her damp cheek. She reaches for the blouse I’m holding and tosses it aside. I let it fall without protest. “I’m not destined to have some great romance, but there are other kinds of love. The kinds we share with our families, our friends.”

Her fingers move down my ribs, her touch turning sensual, even as she coasts over my scales. My nipples tighten as she skims my breasts.

“Gwen, I—”

“I know we’re not truly mateys, not like that. But I liked it when you said it. I like to think that we’re becoming friends. That we share something special.”

Her hands work lower, moving as if she adores the feel of my body despite the flaws I’m all too aware of. I feel good in her hands. A fingertip brushes over my folds, and a tingling spreads through my lower body.

She’s not using her magic on me. She *is* magic.

I could give in to this. Sometimes I get this mad thought that things would have been better if Ronan had never realized his mistake with the sea witch. If he’d never stolen me away in the middle of the night to train and drain all of my sweetness away. I could have lived happily, giving my heart away as I pleased, never knowing any better until my soul was trapped, awaiting the day when Cosette would use me to restore her youth and beauty.

I could give in now, with Gwen's warm fingers stroking over my clit as I whisper against her hair, claiming her as my matey in earnest. I tip her chin up, brushing my lips against hers in the lightest kiss.

My stomach is fluttering, anticipating her next move. I want her naked and pressed against me. I want to take her with my fingers and tongue for hours before I even pull my treasure chest out for us to share. My heart is beating fast, pounding away for her.

Her mouth is still on mine when she murmurs, "I know it's not that sort of love. I know I can't be what Elizabeth was to you, but you don't have to be lonely anymore. We can figure out your curse together."

I snap my head back.

"Elizabeth? Where did you hear that name?" I'm coming back to my senses, but my heart is still pulsing in my ears.

She tries to bring me back to her. "It's carved on your wall. I assumed you were driven mad with the thought of her, that you might have made a deal to save her from something."

"What?" I nearly laugh because it sounds so ridiculous to me. "Snow, these were my father's quarters before they were mine. He probably marked up the wall when he was three sheets to the wind and wrapped up in his own misery. Elizabeth was my mother. I have never felt anything close to love for anyone before—" I clip the word off, watching her eyes fly open with concern.

But she's not looking at my face anymore; she's staring down at the lock of my hair she's holding in her fist.

"Morgen." The color is draining away, the black melting to the blue-grey color of steel from the roots to the ends. My ribs contract, squeezing the air out of my lungs.

"I have to go," I rasp.

Snow lets the handful of hair drop over my shoulder and turns away while I pull my blouse over my head, ready to get back to work without a wink of sleep.

"I think I understand now," she says.

GWEN

Morgen pulls away from me, and I let her. I know that she's been ensnared by dangerous magic, and I can't bear the thought of losing her to it.

Not like I've already lost Shiloh.

For once in my life, I'm not consumed by my own desire to be wanted and cared for. I saw the longing in Morgen's eyes before her hair began to fade. There are deep wells of sadness behind the vibrant blue that I never noticed before—a hunger for something she can't have.

Someone stole great swaths of her life from her, and I want to snatch them back. I want her to hold my hand and call me matey again, but even more than that, I want to see her happy and free from a curse that I'm certain she didn't bring on herself.

For days she keeps her distance, and I stay out of her way, waiting until night falls to slide next to her on the floor. She feigns sleep each time I join her, but I know the sound of her breath when she actually drifts off. That's when I slide my hands over her back, trying to pluck the stingers of her curse from her soul. It never works, but I keep at it until exhaustion hits me, and then I give up and stroke her back instead, chanting soft spells to soothe her through her bad dreams.

The fatigue is overwhelming today after the hours I spent last night trying to push against Cosette's magic. I'm already yawning when I hear Jacques' knock for supper. I blow on the ink and discard the pile of halved apple slices into a wastebasket before shutting the journal. I've spent the day filling its pages with stamps of the swirling seed patterns inside the poisonous fruit. The project has been a nice distraction.

“Cook found the books you two were talking about this morning,” Jacques says and wedges the door open with his foot.

“Splendid! Cook’s theory might not be so far-fetched after all. What do you think about it? What if the Devouring Tree is in bloom again?”

“Then I suppose that means the dragons have awoken,” he says, setting the texts of old dragon magic down on the desk next to my tea.

“Shouldn’t we let the rest of the world know?”

“I think that *if* the Devouring Tree is fruiting in Lollishire again, and the dragons are roaming the foothills of the Sartealean mountains, then there must be people out there who know and really don’t want their secrets to be told. Sometimes it’s safer to keep things to ourselves, even if the burden is heavy, my lady.”

His smile softens the words, but they still have their intended effect. I wipe my stained hands on my skirts and take his arm.

“You know so much more about these things than I do, my friend.” I’m starting to wish he could come to Gentrilly with me. I would trust him to keep me out of trouble.

We make the rounds of our walk, keeping our exercise brief. We can hardly speak against the harsh winds. A bitter cold has seeped into the air, and my clothes are perpetually damp. I look forward to the warm hour in the kitchen with Cook more than my time outside these days.

In the distance, dark mountains loom, sharp and craggy, their points capped with snow. We’re getting closer to Sarteal. A gust of wind pushes my hair over my eyes.

“Don’t get blown away,” one of the seamen calls to me, hustling by.

Almost nothing changed in the way the crew viewed me after learning my true title, but they all seem to hold me in higher esteem now. Being Morgen’s matey holds more sway over their opinion of me than being some would-be princess. The thought makes me smile. I might be her matey in name only, but the title fits better than any of the others I’ve worn before.

“Yo-ho, what’s got you so chuffed?” Morgen’s question rolls out on a foggy breath. She trails behind a couple of men moving a crate up from the hold. She braces a gloved hand on the railing.

I can’t tell Morgen I’ve been thinking about *her*. I tuck my hair back and pull my cap down lower. “Oh. Nothing really.”

“Does it have something to do with the research you’ve been doing with Cook?”

“Sort of. The patterns within the apples are quite unusual. I have a ton of reading to do, but I think I can find evidence to prove what he thinks is true.”

“Fuck me if dragons are going to be swooping in to make shit worse for everyone.” She doesn’t look too troubled by the information though. “I wanted to talk to you for a moment.” She waves to Jacques. “Do you mind if I have a few moments alone with my matey?”

“Of course, Captain,” he says but lingers beside me.

“Don’t worry, I promise I’ll return her to her mother and no one will ever need to find out about this *matey* business,” Morgen says. “She’ll be free to marry as the queen wishes.”

My stomach folds over on itself. I pick at my nail beds. A decent spouse might be a comfort to me someday, but I don’t wish for one now.

“He just worries about me,” I say, watching Jacques stalk off. “Part of me wishes I could ask him to come to Gentrilly with me.”

“You could. He’s a good man. I would miss him, but I would trust him to protect you.”

“I would look after him too. I would ask my mother to restore his honor.” I grip the rail to stand across from her. “What was it you wanted to speak to me about?”

“Your future in Gentrilly,” she says, strands of her hair whipping past her eyes. “Your face brightens when you’re doing something you’re passionate about, like when you discover something interesting in an old text, or when you experiment with your magic.” She watches the waves crash against the ship, rocking us closer to our destination. “You must find a way to make room for those passions, no matter what your mother has in store for you.”

It pains my heart to hear her plan my future when she thinks hers is set in stone. Normally I’d be offended and accuse her of trying to pawn me off so quickly after taking me to her bed, but the look on her face is genuine. She wants me to be happy.

“Promise me you’ll try to hold onto that piece of yourself?” She slides her hand on the railing until her fingertips are touching mine.

“I promise.”

A cooing sound rides the wind. We both look up in time to see a pigeon swooping in over the deck. It flies off to the port side where the messenger coop is located.

“The bird flew in from the northeast,” Morgen says. “None of our ships should be ahead of us.” She takes my hand to pull me along with her to the coop where the single pigeon sings its lonely song. She unties the scroll from its leg, frowning as she eyes the wax seal. “It’s from *The Surreal Jewel*.”

“Isn’t that Captain Oskar’s ship?”

“That’s the one.” The creases on her face deepen as she reads it. She folds it up and hands it to me. “Carys wrote this.”

Worry shoots through me. “She was taken by Captain Oskar? We have to help her!”

“No, love. It turns out she left with Captain Oskar willingly. It’s all in the letter.” She points at the paper I’m pressing to my chest. “But that’s not the alarming part.”

I skim the contents, skipping over the parts about Carys falling for the rogue captain until I reach the last few lines.

Don’t know where you’re heading, but if you detour ‘round Sarteal, be warned that they’ve closed their borders. The entire northern continent is anticipating safety concerns and potential conflict as the funeral processions begin. All of this is to say be careful and stay far away from the nightmare realm. We’re changing our course now.

Please be well. I’m sorry I left, but my heart demanded it.

“Funeral?” I wonder aloud before I realize who’s being mourned. “Oh.”

“This will fuck our plans up entirely. It will take us days to re-route safely while dodging threats from Lavinsar.” Morgen is rubbing her pendant against her sternum and taking deep breaths through her nose. “This was our best choice, but if they’ve closed their borders, their wards will be strong. Nightmare magic warps the mind. I have no idea how to defend our crew against it. It’d be different if we only needed to worry about a few small ships to fight or pay off.”

“It’s ok. I’m sure we’ll figure something out.” I take her hand again. “We could take a break somewhere and try to sell some smuggled goods to recoup our losses before moving on. Everyone in Gentrilly already thinks

I'm dead, so there's no need to rush," I laugh. "It's not like anyone is waiting for me."

"Gods, you would make an excellent matey; you just flow along with everything." It's a flattering sentiment, one that makes me think she might actually be considering taking me as her matey for real, but reality sets in as she presses her fingers over her eyes and continues, "I need this plan to work out. I can't believe I've only recently gotten rid of my nightmares, only to be facing godsdamned nightmare magic."

"You stopped having nightmares?" I ask, lighting up a little.

I'm relieved that I've been able to repay her in some small way without begging my mother for a reward on my behalf. She lifts my chin.

"Are you saying you had something to do with that?" I'm frozen beneath her gaze. "Of course you did." Her mouth sharpens into a smile.

"You're not upset with me, are you?"

"Upset? No, Snow. You're *brilliant!*" She can barely contain her excitement. "I need your help."



I PLUNGE my hands into bowls of water and sing my wishes to the moon. The first quarter phase is a time to check in with the things we've already started to manifest. It's a cheeky era when the Goddess flirts with us by showing just a hint of her full power. Since the last new moon, I've been focusing on trusting my own strength. I can work with that now.

It feels good to concentrate on an intention. My magic moves along with my words and emotions like an extra limb that extends far beyond my physical reach. Morgen is right. I need to hold on to my practice. If my mother wants me to be married off, then I can only wish to be wed to someone who keeps their distance. I merely want to exist with my power and have the space to play without worrying about scaring someone off.

I've never wished to be left alone before, but that might be my best option.

When my thoughts wander too far in the direction of spouses and court etiquette, I prove my strength to myself by making the water dance with another burst of magic.

“Be the shield that saps their strength. Diminish their power as it crosses these lengths,” I whisper and watch luminescent currents ripple around my fingers.

“A nice little rhyme,” Morgen says, shutting the door against the blustery wind. Several empty bowls are tucked beneath her arm. “Is poetry a required subject at the temple?”

“No, but I think it’s a nice touch. It makes my spell-casting feel more mindful.”

“Your spell-casting sounds pretty,” she says, shucking her boots off next to the furs she’s thrown on the floor. “I like it.”

“I take it you’re all done wiping the deck down with the sacred water, then?”

“Yes.” She flexes her fingers, making no move to pull her gloves off. “My hands are damn near frozen now. The rest is meant to be set out in bowls, right?” she asks, eyeing my wet hands with concern.

Her weariness is understandable. We’ve worked together for hours with most of the crew fast asleep in their bunks, and now the sky is grey. The sun will lift its crown through the fog of night soon, marking the day we’ll cross through the nightmare realm.

“Yes, we can put them out on the tables in the morning.”

“Then we’re all set. We’ll have rum, music, dancing, and cards to keep us awake and entertained. That should stave off any sleeping spells.” She grins and loosens her collar. “And the crew won’t know it, but we’ll have your magic defending us throughout it all.”

“You seem very confident in this plan,” I say.

“I am.” Morgen moves to the desk, gripping my wrist. The water dripping from my fingertips lights up for a brief second before hitting the floorboards. “I might not pray to any gods, but I believe in this. In *you*.”

My heart skips a beat, but the joy I feel is short-lived. She believes in me, but I haven’t made any progress in breaking her curse. I fold the thought up tightly. I can only hold space for the mission ahead of us.

“I hope I won’t let you down.” I muster up a smile. “But there are still a few more bowls I need to charm. I wasn’t expecting you to finish your task so soon.”

“Don’t let me stop you,” she says.

“I’ve spent a lot of energy tonight already.” I glance at the floor, avoiding her eyes. “I’m drained.”

“Feel free to get some sleep. I’ll wake you up in an hour or two. That should give us plenty of time to prepare before we cross into Sarteal’s territory.”

“It’s not that,” I say, and she stops unbuttoning her blouse. “I need to recharge and...” The room is cold, but heat sparks between us in the silence. Morgen clears her throat, and I continue, “I know you have your reasons for why can’t get too close to me. I miss your touch, but I’m not insulted. I was only wondering if I could use your...” I drop my eyes to the treasure chest that holds her toys.

“Absolutely.” She sets it on the ground and kneels beside me at her desk that I’ve been using as my altar. “Choose what you need and I’ll step out.”

“Help me pick?”

She exhales roughly. “I think I can manage that.”

She opens the box, revealing the pretty glass dildos and shafts of leather in shades of pink and violet. I pick up a short rubbery toy and press on the nub that curls up like a seashell. “How does this one work?”

She licks her lips. “That part goes inside of you. The larger part presses against your pearl when you rock into it.”

“Oooh,” I breathe, but it doesn’t seem like the right one for this moment. I grab a lavender rod instead. Its rubbery surface is silky in my hands. It’s smooth for a dildo. I like that there are no embellishments on it. “This one is nice.”

She takes it. “I’ve never used this one, but I had to buy it when I saw it. Look at this.” She taps the lower part of the chest, and a compartment slides open. A black leather harness lies on the velvet lining. I hold it up, studying the silver buckles and straps that can be adjusted for size. At the bottom of the contraption, there’s a black loop with an open center.

“That’s where this goes,” she says, slipping the dildo through it. “Then you wear this whole thing.”

“And you’ve never used this before?” It’s a stunning piece. It shouldn’t be sitting in some box, unused and collecting dust.

“I mean, I’ve tried it on,” she says, her breath quickening. “But I’ve never used it on anyone.”

“I bet it looks amazing on you.”

She pushes it toward me. “Do you want to wear it?”

I picture the black straps crisscrossing around her slim hips and the silver buckles digging into her scales. The image sends my heartbeat racing down between my thighs.

"I'd rather see it on you," I tell her. "I'm curious to know what you were imagining when you wore it."

"Snow," she groans, emboldening me. A flare of wicked curiosity urges me on.

"Did you put it on and stroke yourself? Did you thrust your hips while you thought about sliding into someone special?" I ask, torturing myself with the thought. I want to know all the little things that drive her wild. "I think it would be fun, having you take me like that."

Her lashes flutter, and she nuzzles her nose down to the crook of my neck. The satisfaction I get from her touch is instant.

"Are you saying you'd like to ride my strap?" she asks.

"I'm saying it would only be for the purpose of creating magic if you chose to give it to me."

She squeezes her eyes shut. I don't make any sudden moves. I wait for her to come to me.

"Only for magic," she says and takes the harness. "I want your hands on the desk and your skirts around your waist while you wait for me."

I'm more than happy to oblige and be her plaything for the rest of the night. I glance over my shoulder when I hear her footsteps padding across the floor. *Goddess*. She looks even better than I imagined with the leather adorning her hips. Her lithe muscles flex as she moves closer, the blue pendant thumping between her breasts. The shadows sharpen the cut of her jaw. Her scales and the silver buckles gleam.

I have to grasp the ledge to quell the feeling rising in my chest.

"Naughty," she *tsks* and leans over me. Holy mother. She's still wearing her leather gloves. The material feels soft as she slides her hand up my throat. She lifts my chin so her mouth is close to my ear. She bumps her hips forward, pressing the dildo against my ass. "Are you getting impatient?"

"Yes."

"I'll take care of you real soon, but if you peek again before I tell you to, I'll make you beg before I let you come."

She pulls her gloves off and steps back. I close my eyes and sway my hips, desperate for release but unwilling to risk another look over my

shoulder to see what she's doing. A few moments later, she returns, trailing her hand up my thighs. Her fingers are coated in a warm, slippery liquid that she rubs over my pussy.

"I want to make sure you're nice and wet," she purrs as she presses a couple fingers into me.

"I already am."

She laughs and pulls out abruptly to press the dildo to my slit. She sheathes herself inside me with one thrust, and I let out a low moan. She draws out, working the tip in. I get an inch and she takes it back.

I lean onto my forearms, trying to lift my hips higher to get more of her. She tangles her fingers up in my hair. I bite my lip and press my hips back, taking what I want.

"Greedy little thing," she scolds, but she lets go of my hair, freeing her hand so she can stroke over my ribs and down my spine. Her gentle petting doesn't match the tone of her voice or her determined thrusting. She drapes her body over mine and pumps into me. I plunge my hands into the bowls rattling around on the desk, lighting them up with my intentions as I'm flooded with pleasure.

"Gwen." My real name is dripping with ecstasy as she sighs it out. She grabs my hips, opening me up. I start to clench around her, but she pulls out.

"May I please look at you now?" I ask sweetly, not wanting her to make me beg for it. Not tonight when I've been without her for days.

"Yes," she says, turning me to face her as I stand. The dildo lies between her legs. It's all shiny because of me. She drags her mouth over mine for a kiss. I only want more as she slides her tongue over mine. I want more of this. I could survive off the energy that thrums through me as my nipples graze her skin. She steps forward, pushing me back until I hit the edge of the desk. She shoves stacks of ledgers off the side, clearing the space so there's only room for the bowls, candles, and me.

"What about your documents?" I stare at the mess of papers on the floor.

"Fuck my documents," she says. "This is for magic."

She bends her knees, slipping her hands under my thighs to lift my ass onto the surface. When she's positioned between my legs, she works into me again. Her plaits have come undone. Her nipples peek through the silky

strands of hair, and I reach up to pinch one. She thrusts into me, stilling as she holds her breath.

I *am* a greedy little thing. I can't help it.

I lie back, spreading my legs for her, and she works her fingers over my clit while she keeps a steady rhythm with her hips. It feels so good. It's too much and somehow not enough. I think I'll always want more of this. I'm going to dream of these liaisons for the rest of my life.

I stretch my arms out, resting my hands in the bowls while she works me into a frenzy.

"You need this, don't you?" she asks.

"Uh-huh."

"Oh gods, if we could truly be mateys I would make sure you had whatever you needed whenever you needed it." Her circles tighten around my clit. "I would keep you coming for me."

"Only for you," I whisper, and she shudders out a breath. "Do you wish things were different? That we could truly be together?"

She tips her head back. Her nipples are tight and peaked.

"I can't answer that," she says. "Don't make me answer that. I'm so close. I need to be ruthless."

"Then be ruthless with me." I spread my thighs wider for her. "I can take it."

She drives her hips forward, pressing down as she strokes my clit. My climax overtakes me. Pleasure spills through me. I curl my toes tight as each wave rises and falls.

"Gwen," Morgen whispers against my mouth. "Snow." She's leaning over me now, cradling my head in her hands. I blink my eyes open to find her face bathed in pale moonlight.

No. Not moonlight. *My* light.

A soft celestial glow floods the room. The water swirls in the bowls, forming their own miniature tide pools.

I scoop up some water and hold Morgen's gaze as I splash it on her chest. I trace my hands over her scales and circle her nipples, watching her mouth part.

"What are you doing?"

"I want to feel you too," I say. "For magic."

I've blessed plenty of bowls already to keep the ship safe. I have another wish to make right now. My magic rushes through my veins when

I'm with her. She deserves to have someone try.

I slide off the desk and stand to meet her, kissing her as I walk her back to the corner of the room where we sleep. I can feel her heart beating and the prickly arms of the curse lodged deep within her. My magic stretches out, working its invisible tendrils to stroke her skin alongside my fingers before sinking into her body. I try to grasp the curse. I feel strong enough to pull it out.

We crash onto furs together, tumbling on top of them. We both fumble with her strap, undoing the buckles. When she's freed from it, I work my mouth down to her folds where she's swollen and impossibly slick with desire.

I lap at her clit, sucking and pressing her thighs to my ears, caressing her legs and hips with my fingertips. She grasps at the furs, crying out for me. Calling me Snow. Calling me Gwen.

The curse lashes at my magic, but I keep trying to draw it out. It's within my grasp. I almost have it.

Morgen lifts her hips, and I grasp her by the ass, holding her in my mouth as she comes. I use her pleasure as leverage, tugging on the shadowy curse.

She pants, and I lower her down, but I don't let go of her when I draw back. Sweat trickles down my forehead as the spikes of the curse sharpen, stabbing into my magic. I gasp, and my magic retreats, shrinking from the sea witch's magic that doesn't fight fairly.

"What was that?" she asks, sitting up to touch my face.

"Nothing." I don't want to let her know how stuck her curse is. I want to keep trying.

"I wasn't too rough, was I?"

"No, you were perfectly ruthless."

She sinks back into the furs, and I don't even pretend to go back to the bed. There isn't much time left for sleep, but if she drifts off soon I might be able to make one more attempt at yanking out her curse again.

Morgen rolls toward me. I stop plotting and start bracing myself for her to push me away. I brought her too close again. I know it. I can feel the rejection starting as she takes a deep breath.

"Gwen, I *do* wish things were different. You need to know that," she says quietly before turning over.

Neither of us falls asleep. We lie awake in silence until morning comes.

GWEN

The tables have been set, the deck has been swabbed with blessed moon water, and the crew has gathered for safety. We've warmed our bellies with nips of liquor and fried balls of dough, and we're keeping the festivities and conversations going in the daylight. The sky is a clear blue stretch, but a cloud of dread hangs over us as the coast of Sarteal looms near.

Gulls squawk overhead, pulling my attention from the story Skye is telling. Strange energy rolls off the mist-shrouded mountains ahead. Every sudden noise has me searching the horizon, half-expecting to see the beastly wings of dragons flapping in the distance.

"That was terrible, Skye," Lilah says. "One of you has to have a scarier story than that."

Skye leans back in their chair. "I'm sorry, what could possibly be creepier than a phantom dog?"

Lilah places a card down and takes one of Skye's chips.

Rhys studies his hand and speaks without looking up from his cards. "I'll tell you what's scary—hurtling straight into Sarteal's waters knowing they've got their wards up. I heard about a man who clawed his eyes out when he fell under the spell of nightmare magic."

"That's not helpful right now," Jacques cautions. Rhys rubs the healed bump on his nose and picks a card.

"I know a good ghost tale," I pipe up, trying to steer the crew away from an argument before Morgen bites someone's head off. She's been silently seething since someone started playing the fiddle. "In Lavinsar, it's told there's a beautiful specter who roams the labyrinth of the salt

mines, waiting to offer water and comfort to the most fatigued laborers. Once someone is fooled by her otherworldly charm, something horrible is bound to happen to them.”

“I know this one well,” Griff says, and Sampson rubs his arm. I’ve never noticed the scars on Griff’s neck before. Pink splotches mark the spots where the skin bubbled open with sores—the telltale sign of too many hours spent in the dry conditions of Lavinsar’s mines. “My buddy swore the ghost came to him once, dressed in a white gown. Her skin was just as pale, but her lips were blood red. He was fascinated by her.”

“Did anything bad happen to him?” Sampson asks.

“The next day the cable on the cage broke. He plunged seven stories deep into the mines and died. My mother begged me to join the navy after that. The salt mines were so dangerous. She thought I’d be safer.” He sips his mug of ale and chuckles darkly.

I slump my shoulders forward, trying to hide my guilt. Griff isn’t much older than me. We grew up in the same place, but I used to walk on the ground above him. I was never worked to the bone, and I always had fresh air and plenty to eat. I judged the crew so harshly when I first came aboard. I believed everything I’d been taught about pirates.

But now I see them as they are—desperate to escape the systems keeping them from living a decent life.

A hand clamps down on my knee, and I draw in a breath. My drink is sloshing in its cup from the burst of emotion. Thankfully no one has noticed. Without looking at me, Morgen keeps her hold on my leg beneath the table, brushing her thumb lightly over my inner thigh.

Jacques pushes a stack of chips forward. “Perhaps something cheery would be better. How about a nice love story?”

Everyone else groans, but I clap my hands.

“I love the one about King Casimir taking Queen Eilwyn to his secret cottage to declare his love for her.”

“A king takes his captive to his secret cottage in the woods, and she has a baby nine months later,” Skye says. “Totally romantic. Nothing nefarious about that.”

“Hush. It *is* romantic,” I argue. “His father built the cottage for his mother, and it was charmed so that only their descendants could find it. Casimir gifted Eilwyn the necklace that granted her access to the place because she was his true love.”

Lilah fakes a gag.

“Everyone knows the story about the cottage,” Morgen says. “But very few people know what happened to the necklace.”

“What is this? Captain has taken a woman to her cabin, and now she’s telling love stories?”

I laugh at Skye’s quip, but my smile drops when I see the circles under Morgen’s eyes. They’re so dark they look bruised. She collects the cards to shuffle the deck and starts her story.

“The necklace was passed down through many generations and landed in the hands of one of his descendants—some duke’s daughter who was the apple of her mother’s eye. The girl was very beautiful and coveted by the rich men in the village. Her parents had every intention of marrying her off to some wealthy shopkeeper with a noble name, but she had other plans.”

“To make a life for herself without being forced into marriage?” Lilah suggests.

“Not quite,” Morgen says. “You see, she’d fallen in love with a handsome fisherman who’d sailed to her island, but the crew was due to head south again soon. She begged him to stay and fish on her island, but he wanted to make his fortune so that he’d be worthy of her. She swore she didn’t care about his money, but he insisted. Before he left, she told him she was running away to a secret cottage in the woods. She gave him her necklace and made him promise he’d find her.”

Morgen deals the cards. Everyone is too caught up in her tale to check their hand.

“Anyways, the man made his fortune and came back for her the next year. He wandered through the woods of Corstyliia like she’d told him to, and he found the cottage. He was delighted to find that a thing of fairytales actually existed, but he quickly realized he was alone in the small house and went back to the village to search for his lover.”

“I feel like this isn’t going to end well,” Rhys says. Jacques swallows. Morgen stares at her cards.

“When he knocked on her family’s door, the servants answered. His new money and fancy clothes couldn’t hide who he was—a man who’d been born with nothing. They’d hardly broken the news that his sweet love had died months ago before slamming the door in his face.”

“My gods, this isn’t a romance,” Lilah says. “This is a tragedy.”

“It’s a love story all the same,” Morgen counters, unblinking. “He’d grown up like most street urchins, willing to pick up odd jobs from the seediest of people. He used to run errands for a witch, so he turned to her for help. You see, the man’s love made him a fool.”

“He didn’t try to bring her back to life, did he?” A pit is opening in my stomach. Necromancy is just as taboo as soul harvesting.

“No. He only wanted something that he could pour the rest of his life into. A purpose. A reason to travel to the ends of the world and try to forget his lover’s face. The witch told him that she could give him what he desired, but it would come at a steep price. He showed her the necklace.”

Lilah scoffs. “He sold her family heirloom? What a prick.”

Morgen’s mouth twitches. “The witch didn’t want it. It was worthless to her. She wanted a soul.”

My peripheral vision blurs. I can’t see or hear anyone’s reactions. There are only Morgen’s words in my head.

“He sold his soul for a *purpose*?” Skye’s question rattles around in my mind. I already know what Morgen’s answer is going to be.

“No. She didn’t want *his* soul. She told him it smelled like booze and depression. She asked for his firstborn’s soul instead.”

“No,” I whisper, the threat of tears stinging my sinuses.

“He thought he’d lucked out,” she laughs. “He thought he’d be the first man to fool the witch. He had no children, and he spent lonely nights in taverns crying in any wench’s tits who’d let him. He’d always pay them without bedding them; there were no children in his future. So he made the deal, and when she brought out her scrying ball she showed him the price he’d paid.”

The water is calm, but the air is rushing in my ears.

“No one had bothered to tell him that his lover had died in childbirth. He wished the witch had taken his soul instead. If there was an afterlife, he knew he would never be reunited with the one he’d lost. He brokered one more deal with the witch, a chance for his child to reclaim her soul.”

“The child was a girl?” Griff asks. “What happened to her?”

Morgen’s mouth opens, but she shuts it and shrugs. She can’t speak of it. “I don’t know.”

“I call bullshit,” Skye says. “If that’s what happened to the necklace, then what was the woman’s name who gave it away?”

“Elizabeth,” I answer quietly. “I think her name was Elizabeth.”

“This is why I hate love stories,” Lilah says. “Now I’m depressed. Look at Snow; she’s depressed too. Let’s talk about something less draining, like the stars. Isn’t your sister, Princess Briallen, a bit of a scholar in astronomy?”

I place my hand on Morgen’s, but she pulls it off my thigh.

“Um.” I’m too caught up with Morgen’s veiled confession to process the question. I’ve never even met my sister. Everything I know about her, I learned from the same news articles that everyone else did. “I think she is.”

“I’d love to run an observatory like hers someday,” she says, swirling her drink.

A sudden blast shocks us all into jolting back in our seats. Lilah’s glass slips from her hand, shattering. A line of smoke fizzles up in the air before bursting into an orange flame.

“It’s a distress signal,” Sampson says.

Morgen is already pushing away from the table. “I didn’t even notice that ship up there.” She holds her arm out in front of me protectively.

“Neither did I,” Griff says.

The ship is tilted, and its starboard railing has been smashed against the cliffside. Its foremast is snapped and splintered across the top of the rocky ledge. Even with the wreckage, the vessel is huge.

“How did we miss it?” I ask.

“I don’t know.” Jacques moves beside me. His blade is drawn. “That’s a bad wreck. They could’ve been affected by nightmare magic.”

“Then who sent the distress signal?” Another flare goes up. “Shouldn’t we help them?”

The fiddle music has stopped. An eerie hush has fallen over the crew. Everyone flocks to the rails to peer at the ship.

“I don’t recognize their banners,” someone says. The flags are tattered and their emblems are scored through. The wheel turns without anyone steering.

Something thumps against the side of *The Ruined Soul*. Morgen reaches for me. Her pulse is racing when she holds me to her chest.

“Shit, Captain,” Skye yells, backing away from the railing. Their sword is raised high and ready to strike. “You’re going to want to see this. We need all the hands we can get.”

It sounds like nails are scratching at the hull of the ship. “We’re being boarded,” Morgen hisses, pushing me to Jacques. “Secure her in the hold and get your ass back up here.”

“Don’t lock me down there alone,” I plead with her. “I’d rather help.”

“You have no weapon,” she says.

“But I can still help.” I wiggle my fingers.

“No. You can’t.” She sets her face in an unreadable expression.

“Come along, my lady. She’s right. You’ll be safer down here,” Jacques says, lifting the hatch. I want to scream that I can’t be left alone in this deep darkness, but there are footsteps racing along the deck. I cling to the ladder, too afraid to move. “Climb down.”

I descend slowly, and Jacques seals me in the hold. I breathe through my terror, securing myself on each rung as I climb, grasping tightly until my feet hit solid ground.

I walk my hands along the wall, praying that I’ll find a lantern. A sigh of relief wooshes past my lips when I tap one and send it swinging on its hook. I snatch it up and feel around on the floating shelves for the matches. I strike one, and in the second when the flame flares, it looks like a shadowy figure is moving between the crates.

It’s just my imagination. I hate being alone in dark places like this. I shiver as I light the lantern, remembering how it felt in the priestess’ crypt when some of the servant blues locked me in there as a prank. I don’t know why I’m thinking of that now; that happened years ago. But dread sinks its claws into my stomach just as it did that day.

I hold the lantern out, pleased to see that the hold is mostly filled with boxes and blankets, not marble statues and sarcophagi. I can sit here and wait this out. It will be ok.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The sound of boots has faded overhead. The knocking is coming from within. Bile rises in my throat. *Three knocks foretell a death.* I make the symbol of the Goddess to protect myself from the bad omen. I trace a crescent moon on my forehead, slash a straight line down the center of my lips, then draw a full moon over my heart.

TAP. TAP. TAP.

I consider sprinting to the ladder, but I have no way to defend myself if I open the hatch to a violent scene. A sick sense of curiosity compels me

to move toward the sound. I can't ignore it. I walk on as a woman possessed, although I'm petrified.

Yellow light glints off a glass surface. It's only a reflection of my lantern. Cobwebs stretch across the stand of a gilded full-length mirror, and grey spots tarnish the intricate frame.

My limbs are heavy, as though I'm trying to move through water to get closer. Isn't there something about mirrors that I'm supposed to be afraid of? My thoughts feel very far away, but I have the sense to pick up a brown drop cloth from the floor to cover the thing.

It's too late.

The reflection stands still as I complete the motion, frozen in a pure white gown. Hands too slender to be mine lift a gossamer veil.

I try to step back, but Grimhilde's voice echoes around me. "Where do you think you're going, my sweet girl?"

"This isn't real. You can't be here."

"I can be anywhere and everywhere with help from my friend in the mirror." The sheer layers of her skirts trail behind her as her feet crunch over bones. She touches the reflective glass. "Don't you want me to find you and bring you home? Haven't you missed me?"

Don't I? Who am I without Grimhilde? I'm not even sure I'm the same Gwendolyn I was before I tore away from her tower of bones.

She takes my silence as an answer. "There's no need to worry your pretty little head. You'll be safe with me."

"No, that's not right," I say aloud. My thoughts are jumbling together. "You want me dead."

"Not true." The lamplight bends around her fingers, and her arms push through. I cover my mouth as she steps into the hold. "I only want to protect you from yourself." She folds me into a hug. This was all I ever wanted from her, but her embrace feels like a restraint. The scent of rose oil and salt jams my nostrils, sharpening my desperation to get away from her.

"I'll never let you go again," she says, tightening her hold. The lantern slips from my hands.

"My sweet Gwendolyn, you'll have everything you've ever wanted." On the other side of the mirror, there's a whole crowd gathered, dressed in servant blues. They're all undressing each other, dancing and swaying

inside a circle paved with skulls. “The tiniest taste of your own magic, and all of the pleasure and praise you could ever dream of.”

Fingers tug at silk ribbons, and layers of tulle and linen float on the air as they’re stripped from smooth skin in shades of bronze, porcelain, and umber. “Anything to placate you and keep you from wondering.”

“Wondering what?”

“What you really are. What you’re capable of doing.” Her hug is constricting, cutting off my air. The things I used to long for seem like a cage now. My fingers are glowing, but the blue light flows away from my body in wisps that seep through the mirror and encompass the circle of servant blues. “All you’ve ever wanted is to be loved, but only I can do that. Come back, and let me love your bones.”

The hatch bursts open. Grimhilde’s embrace holds, unbroken by the intrusion. I can’t draw a breath. There’s no air to carry my scream.

“Snow! Shit!” Skye’s shout carries as they skip the ladder completely and plummet into the hold. “*Unfff.*” They land on their feet and charge right into a sprint, wielding their sword.

“No one will ever steal you away from me again,” Grimhilde promises. My thoughts are fuzzy, and I’m running out of breath. The mirror curves. The faces of the servant blues are distorted, their eyes dead and hollow as they mash together in an orgy under a blood moon. “Everything will be ok as long as you’re a good girl.”

I can be good and obey. That’s the best way to protect myself. I can just give in and let her take me back.

“This is a nightmare,” Skye says. “She’s not real.” How can that be? I’d know the feel of Grimhilde’s arms and the smell of her skin anywhere. “I don’t know what happens if you die here, but Morgen will kill me if I let that happen.”

Morgen. Where is she?

“Don’t think of her,” Grimhilde croons. “You don’t need anyone else but me. She won’t care when you’re gone.”

But Morgen is the hero I never knew I needed—I can’t stop thinking of her. Deep in the hazy recesses of my mind, I know she’ll care if I’m dragged back to the salt prison that masquerades as a fortress. I can’t comply with Grimhilde. I can’t be her good girl anymore. Not when Morgen will come looking for me.

“Your name is Gwendolyn, and you’re on a pirate ship heading for Gentrilly,” Skye says. “We’re trapped in a nightmare. None of this is real.”

“None of this is real,” I repeat and suck in a lungful of air. “Your love was never real.”

I lift my arms, surprised that nothing is pinning them against my ribs anymore. A mirror sits in the shadows, its dull, cracked glass gathering dust. No visions dance on its surface.

Skye holds out their hand. “We need to help the others. Let’s get the fuck out of here, little fish.”

“Hurry up, you two.” Lilah is holding the hatch open with one hand as she calls down to us. “I need help up here.”

“Was everyone ok after the attack?” I ask. People might be wounded on the deck.

“What attack?” Skye pulls me up the last rung. “Last thing I remember, I was telling you a terrifying tale about phantom dogs.”

“I remember that too. Then I was here, and I received a pigeon from my jilted betrothed claiming he’d found me,” Lilah says with a shudder. Wispy ringlets cling to her neck. “We all must have fallen under the spell at different times. It’s hard to tell what’s real and what’s not, but look at the horizon.”

The ocean slants at an unnatural angle. The water looks like it’s flowing right off the edge of the planet. “That’s how I knew this was an altered reality.”

“It seems we’re all facing our individual fears,” I muse. “What did you see, Skye?”

“Vampires.” They shake their head. “I fucking hate vampires. Thank the gods Lilah looked to the sky and realized what was going on.”

“Yes.” I’m grateful to be free of Grimhilde’s grasp. “Where’s Morgen?”

“We don’t know,” Lilah says. “We haven’t found her yet, but we’ve helped most of the crew shake free of their nightmares already. They disappear when they wake up.”

“I don’t think I can hold on much longer,” Skye says. Their features are blurred around the edges.

“You should go back and help protect our bodies,” I tell them. “I can help Lilah rouse the others.”

Skye nods, and their body dissolves in the mist. There's no telling what our reality looks like, but I hope we're all safe.

"Skye found Jacques earlier, but he was being difficult. Perhaps he'll listen to you," Lilah suggests, already walking ahead. She points to a man dressed in the full armor of a Gentrillian knight. "I'll take care of Cook while you handle him."

With his thick hair and muscular build, I don't recognize Jacques until I hear him speak.

"Please, your majesty," he begs, dropping to his knees. "There's no need to take my tongue. I promise I'll never tell anyone what I know. I only care about your family's safety, not your personal affairs. Please." He rocks back, trying to get away from some invisible figure as his gauntlet is torn from his arm. "No!" he screams, and his flesh bubbles and burns with the brand of a thief.

"Jacques!" I call to him, but he's running away. "Jacques, please, I need your help."

He stops, and I touch his arm. His young face might not be familiar, but his kind eyes are. "My lady?"

"It's me. I need you to wake up."

"But the Hamershells have been slain and Queen Isobel has called for my tongue. They all died, and I ran. I'm a coward. I'm not worthy of serving someone like you."

"You're no coward," I say firmly. "You're a good, honorable man, and right now I need you."

"You do?"

"Yes. You must wake up and protect my sleeping body."

"I can't leave you here," he says.

"Yes, you can." I squeeze his hands. "You are my noble protector. I trust you with my safety. Please wake up."

He closes his eyes and bows. "As you wish, my lady."

He vanishes. There's no time to fret because Lilah is waving to me, and I can feel the tug of the waking world calling me back to my body. We walk the deck, sending crew members to wake their friends. After we reunite Sampson and Griff, I notice that Lilah's gown is fading at the hem.

"You're waking up," I say.

"Yes."

"But we still haven't found Morgen."

“I tried the captain’s cabin earlier. The door wouldn’t open.” She rubs her elbows. “Maybe she’s not trapped. Maybe she’s not afraid of anything.”

But I saw her that day in the hollow, hugging her knees to her chest. And I saw the look on her face when her hair changed so rapidly.

“I’m going to stick around for a little while.”

“I don’t feel right leaving you here alone.” Lilah follows me to the stern.

“I don’t think you have a choice,” I say, watching her figure disperse into thin air. I open the door to the cabin, surprised that it unlocks so easily for me. The threat of the nightmare tickles its fingers down my back, trying to lure me into its dark magic. I push forward, finding Morgen curled up and hiding on a canopied bed.

One look around me confirms what I’ve suspected—the captain has more to fear than anyone else on her ship.



THE CABIN IS TOO BRIGHT, and the bed is too grand. This room lacks the simple touches of rich elegance found on *The Ruined Soul*. The posters on the bed are bone white, and aquamarine pillows are thrown upon an ivory duvet. Sunlight creeps around the edges of pale blue curtains, and the walls are lined with bleached shelves filled with jars. The containers are made from milky glass. Each one holds swirling grey matter that’s trapped beneath rusted silver lids.

Nothing looks right here. Not even Morgen.

Jet black hair streams past the elbows of her red taffeta sleeves. The knobs of her spine show between the place where her hair parts. Her skin is flawless, a smooth white sheet without a hint of scales.

“Morgen.”

She crab crawls back to the other edge of the bed. Her face has been made up in the old Corstylian style—with heavy rouge and her lips blotted out and repainted into the shape of a heart. Her small breasts are unmarked and pushed over the scalloped lace of her sweetheart neckline. But the most uncanny thing is the horror in her eyes.

“It’s only me, “ I tell her. The flexed tendons in her neck relax a bit at the sound of my voice.

“I know you,” she says, but it sounds like a question. She throws her arms around a bedpost.

“You do.”

“You can’t be here. She’ll find you.”

“Who will?”

I reach for the canopy, touching the transparent fabric between us. My toe connects with something rubbery sticking out from under the bed.

“I can’t say her name,” she says as I spot the curled fingers and limp arm lying on the floor. My heart pounds, pumping acidic fear through my chest. “She’s always watching. Always listening. Always waiting to find my weak spot.”

The arm slides under the bed with a slurping sound.

“Morgen, it’s ok.” I work to keep the panic from my voice. “It’s only a bad dream. No one is watching you.”

“Of course she can see us,” she whispers. She lets go of the post and crawls toward me. “This is her bedroom. Can’t you hear her?”

There’s sucking and chewing beneath the bed. Outside the window, there’s the sound of rice being poured into a pan, or rain hitting a tin roof, or... neither of those fits what I’m hearing. I rush to the windows and pull the curtains open. It’s sand. Sand is pouring all around us, piling up on the window ledge. The jars rattle on the wall. Jars of souls trying to escape.

This is the sea witch’s room.

I leap onto the bed, cupping Morgen’s face.

“I know you,” she says again, confused by the nightmare magic. “You can’t be here.”

“You have to listen to me. This is a dream.”

“If she finds you here—”

“She won’t be able to hurt me.”

“But she’ll know that I dream of you,” she says. A single tear cuts through the layers of her makeup. “She’ll know how to test my heart, and I’ll fail. My time is almost up, and I’m going to fail at the very end. Every cruel thing I’ve done to prove myself to her will be for nothing.” Her eyes dart to the jars. “Because if she tries to hurt you...”

No. I don’t want the story about her father’s fool bargain to be real. I want it to stay in the nightmare realm where it belongs because it’s too

horrible to comprehend.

“Look at me. If there’s a test, you do whatever you need to do to keep yourself from those jars. I have my magic. I can take care of myself.” *You taught me that.* “But for now, all I need you to do is wake up and get out of this nightmare.”

“I can’t leave you here alone,” she says. “I won’t.”

She’s so wrapped up in this dream, I’m certain that she’ll be sucked right back into it the moment I leave.

“I’m not leaving until you do.” I lie down on the bed and pat the space beside me. She curls up on her side, facing me. I stroke her hair and her unblemished neck. “You’ve faced this for far too long on your own.”

“What if she comes back when I leave?”

“Then I will curse her for doing this to you.”

She turns over, checking the door. “You can’t say that, she’ll hear you.”

“I wish she could.” I pull her back down to me and clasp her hands in mine, tucking them under my chin. “But this is only a dream, and you need to wake up.”

She opens her mouth to protest, but I stop her. “Please.”

She fizzles away in my grasp, and I’m left in the bed, empty-handed. The jars fall down, one by one. The sand is pouring, pressing on the window pane. Morgen’s nightmare is becoming my own. I envision her, the *real* her—all scars, blue eyes, and twining muscles. I picture the ship and the crew, using their faces as a safe touchstone, an anchor that grounds me back to my body.

I wake up gasping in the dim light of Morgen’s cabin with her arms around me. We’re tucked in tight on the narrow bed, our breathing in sync as we rock on a gentle night tide. The whole day has passed us by.

“Shh, it’s all right. You’re awake now. We’re far past Sarteal’s borders.” She brushes my hair back from my forehead. “We carried you to bed. I have to tell everyone you’re awake. We were all so worried about you.”

“Wait.” More than half of her hair is silver. I gather a lock, letting the strands spill between my fingers. Sarteal might be far behind us, but Morgen’s nightmare is unshakeable. “Was everything you told me real? Are you being tested on the ruthlessness of your heart? Is this the marker that shows you how close you are to losing your soul?”

“Gwen—” She can’t answer me, but I can see the truth in her eyes when I run my fingers over the scales cresting her collarbones.

“And these show how close you are to becoming one of her sirens instead.” I grit my teeth together. “What a generous buyout the sea witch has offered you for the bargain your father made.”

“It’s better than the jars,” Morgen says, almost to herself.

It is better than the prospect of losing her soul. I’ll admit that. But it’s not fair. Either way, she serves Cosette in the end.

“How much time do we have?” I’ve convinced myself that I can help her, that I might be able to talk her into coming to visit me every few months once I’m in Gentrilly so we can work on breaking her curse together. I’m sure I can figure it out, but I’m new to exploring my power. I need more time.

I sit up, watching the sand slip in the hourglass on her desk. Untwining myself from Morgen, I run to grab it and flip it over. The sand won’t empty from the bottom. There’s hardly any left on top. The blasted thing is enchanted; there’s no stopping the flow of time.

“Snow, it’s ok,” she says. “I was almost out of time when I met you.”

“How long?”

“Until my thirty-fifth birthday. That has always been the deadline. That’s why we need to stay on schedule to make it to Gentrilly.”

“When is your birthday?”

“I was born under the scorpion moon,” she replies. I do the math in my head. One week. We have one week. That’s barely enough time to make it to Gentrilly. I rub my temples, pacing the floor.

“I wish I was stronger. I wish I knew my own limits and how to test and stretch them properly. I couldn’t even keep us safe from the nightmare magic.”

“We would have been trapped there forever if you hadn’t weakened their wards,” she says. “Dozens of ships laid wasted near the coast. We were lucky to escape.”

I curl up my fists. “It’s not enough. I told you I would help you.”

“Really, it’s ok. I’ve made my peace with it—”

“I don’t want to make peace with it, though. Not after everything you’ve done for me.”

“I didn’t do this for you. It was all for myself. To make sure my ship is still running after...” She pinches her sleeve, scraping at the irritated skin

beneath. She won't allow herself to feel a moment of weakness. She can't. Because of Cosette.

"We were in her bedroom in your dream. You've been there before."

"You judge me for it." Her chin stays down, but she flicks her wounded gaze up at me. There's an immeasurable pain in her stare, a brokenness she's never had any hope of repairing. My fierce pirate doesn't seem so invincible right now. "But until you, she was the only woman who knew about this." She spreads her hand over her chest. "There was no real pleasure in it."

"I judge *her* for it." Water gurgles in the bowl on the desk, pulsing along with my anger. "She did this to you and took advantage of the loneliness she created."

Outside these walls, the ocean laps along the hull. Magic pricks at my fingertips, swelling along with each wave, urging me to release it. I flex my fingers, letting the energy roll off me as if it has a will of its own. It tips over the mouth of the pitcher and the sides of the bowl, seeking water. I can sense the moisture even though I'm not touching it myself.

I lift my hands, and water spirals up from the separate containers, combining to form one long ribbon. It circles over Morgen's head, and she hops off the bed, holding her arms out as the water snakes around her body.

"Snow, what are you doing?"

The thin stream slips over her waist and curls around her thighs without touching her. First, the lantern goes out, then the candles. I hold my breath in the dark until the thin thread of blue light glows around Morgen.

I push my magic forward, focusing my energy when it snags on the barbed edge of the curse. It hurts to hold on, but I dig deeper, trying to wrap my light around each of the dark spines. They stab like thorns, cutting through my efforts.

"She doesn't get to do this to you."

I shove, and the rest of the noise in the cabin drops away. Morgen's voice is a distant thing. Black shadows trickle around the water, dimming the blue streaks of light. Dueling forces of magic fill my line of vision. I'm consumed by one task—to keep pulling on this poisonous urchin of a curse.

“You’re hurting yourself.” Two arms wrap around me, knocking me back against something solid. *Morgen’s body*. “Gwen, stop.”

Rain falls softly as I let go. The blue light twinkles out as the droplets hit our shoulders, leaving us in the dark with puddles at our feet. Morgen tilts her head down so her forehead touches mine. The contact is soothing to my temper. She rubs my low back until I stop trembling.

Her boots click across the floorboards as she strides to the desk to light the tapered candles. She blows out the match and comes back to me with a handkerchief in hand.

“I need you to be ok,” she says, dabbing beneath my nose. The cloth is stained with my blood when she tosses it aside. Her thumb swipes over my jaw, lifting my mouth to hers. She speaks against my parted lips. “When all of this is over, I need to know you’re going to be ok.”

MORGEN

Gwen softens in my arms, her resistance washing away as I feather my lips over hers to punctuate my confession. I need her to be ok.

“I’m sorry I lost control,” she whispers. I continue touching her lightly, pressing my palm against the small of her back. It takes time to shed the anxiety of terrible dreams.

“It’s ok.”

“I’m just so angry at everyone responsible. Your father may not have known any better, but he should’ve tried harder to find a healer who could’ve helped you.” She sounds more like herself now, but there’s a hint of that reckless magic trickling through the air when she adds, “And if I ever meet the sea witch again, I’ll make her pay for what she took from you. From us.”

From us.

Then she feels it too. Butterflies beat their wings in my stomach, rendering me speechless. It’s hard to read her expression in the dim light, but I feel the rush of air when she waves a hand between us.

“I only mean that whatever this is—it feels easy. Even with all the trials we’ve faced. I’ve spent my whole life hoping someone would cherish me. I was devastated when Grimhilde told me I would never know true love. But I don’t think I would trade *this* for anything, not even a true love match.”

I smile as I press my mouth to hers. She really doesn’t know. They shut her away in that tower and convinced her she was unlovable, and now she can’t see the way I look at her. How the crew moves around her.

“I could be content on the seas with you if only we had more time,” she says. “I mean it when I say I could kill her.”

I should tell her everything she deserves to hear, but that would only complicate matters. For both of us.

“My gods, you are so precious,” I say instead, running my hand over her hip.

“Even when I’m talking about committing murder?”

“Especially when you’re talking about committing murder.”

She closes her eyes and sucks on my bottom lip. She traces her tongue inside the plump swell, erasing the memory of Cosette’s teeth, showing me a gentleness I’ve never known before.

“If we only have a little time like this, then I want it to count,” she pants and presses against me. “You say you must be ruthless, so be ruthless. If there’s a test, then I don’t need you to step in for me. I don’t want you to. Promise me you won’t.”

I’m still stunned that I was able to talk so freely about my curse while we were in the nightmare realm.

“I won’t,” I respond, knowing the only way I can keep that promise is to distance myself from her before I’m tested.

“Being ruthless means taking what you want, so take me if you want me.” I do. I want her so badly. I tug at her gown, fumbling hastily to remove the wet fabric and feel her warm skin. “Take me to your bed, and I’ll be yours for all of the days we have left.”

I eye the bed. I’ve spent years lying on the floor, depriving myself of pleasure or soft things to keep myself from getting too comfortable, but I want Gwen in my bed, and I’m going to have her there. Mine to hold and cherish for a few more days.

“Mine until Gentrilly,” I whisper.

I push her gown down to her waist, and she slides her hands up my blouse, untucking it from my trousers before unbuttoning it. I don’t know which one of us starts the kiss, but our lips lock as I walk her across the room. We bump against each other in the mad dash to get our clothes off, and Snow stumbles when the backs of her thighs hit the edge of the bed. I catch her before she can fall back.

“I’ve got you.” She licks a line from the top of my tit to the valley above my collarbone. “Fuck,” I groan, and she presses a knee between my legs.

“And I’ve got *you*,” she says. Her breath hits my damp skin, and goosebumps crop up around the scales on my arms. “I’m not giving up until I find a way to break your curse.”

I’m ready to forget all about the curse when she wraps her arms around me and sinks onto the mattress, pulling me down with her. Her hands are already roaming over my back and thighs as I press up on my forearms and roll my hips over hers.

My pendant dangles over her lips, and when she tips her head back, it sinks into her mouth for a second. It does look like a relic from a fairytale, with her pink tongue curving around its dark blue edges. She could take the pendant and run to the enchanted safety of the cottage. It might unlock for her, but that would mean my heart is...

I sweep the wild thought away and focus on the heat of her skin.

I could grab my treasure chest and show her a few more magical things, but there’s so much left unspoken that I can only say with my body. I thread my fingers through her hair, pulling the amulet from her mouth with my teeth so I can kiss her and will time to slow down for these next few days.

We twist against each other, our hips rising and falling in time together until the quilt is a crumpled mass beneath us. I come up for air. My entire body is throbbing.

“Why don’t you open your pearl for me?” I suggest, flicking my tongue over the spot below her jaw, feeling her pulse jump.

“You first. I’m dying to taste you too,” she says, snaking a hand around my thigh to tease a finger over my slit from behind. I’m aching for her. I know I’ll come the moment she licks over my clit, and I’d rather stay in this heightened state of need for a while.

“I have something else in mind.” I kiss my way down her stomach and over her hips while she situates her legs, bending her knees and spreading her thighs. I touch along her folds where a short crop of soft curls has grown in, and I part her, circling over the slick skin.

I suck her clit into my mouth, and she arches her back away from the mattress. I stroke her inner thighs and move her hand from my hair, guiding it down to her folds. “Here, hold yourself open.”

I straddle her waist, rubbing a few self-indulgent circles over my clit before sliding down against her.

“This way always takes too long,” she whispers. “It’s hard to find the right spot.”

“That’s ok.” I hook my heels beneath her knees and brace my hands on the dents in her hips. “There’s plenty of time to make you feel good, Princess.”

Having her warm, slick cunt pressed against my own is a pleasure in its own right. The buzzing builds between my legs, growing stronger with each pass, and each time our clits line up, we grind and moan, trying to chase the sensation and hold on to it for as long as we can. There are so many close calls where my stomach tightens and I’m afraid this bliss will end before I’m ready, but she calls me back to myself each time.

“Captain,” she whimpers. “Not yet. Not when we fit together so nicely.”

I thrust my cunt against hers, luxuriating in the way her curves feel beneath my hands and how her hair looks fanned across the pillow.

Snow bites her lower lip and holds my gaze when I slide down against her. My orgasm rises through me, a soft, fluttering thing that has me sighing her name. She reaches up and pulls me to her, rolling us both onto our sides.

“Now it’s time to take what *I* want,” she says. There’s hardly enough room for us on the bed, so we’re tangled up tight as she grinds against my thigh. I work my fingers into the space between, heat spilling down to my center again when I feel the bud of her clit and her wet slit. I push one finger in, and she cries out against my mouth when I work a second one in.

We’re both damp with sweat and the rain from her magic, and we slide against each other easily, our breasts, cunts, and thighs touching at all times.

She finds my slit. I’m still sensitive from my climax, but I want this endless pushing and pulling. I want to feel her and come again as she starts to clench around my fingers.

“Morgen,” she pleads, and I give her what she wants—curling my finger until I hit that spot that has her squirming and clutching onto my shoulders. I shudder, feeling another echo of an orgasm coursing through me as our tongues meet.

We kiss softly, lightly, and I’m dizzy with joy when I look into her eyes, knowing that she’s looking past my cold exterior, and I’m being seen

for the first time in my life because she knows my truth.

We keep touching with our pleasure-slicked fingers, neither of us moving to the floor. I have to remind myself that we'll disentangle from each other once we make it to Gentrilly. For now, I'm only taking what I want.

"Have you heard any news yet? Is Snow awake?" I squeeze my eyes shut at the panicked sound of Cook's voice outside the cabin.

Jacques coughs. "I believe she's awake."

"I should've known your loyal guard would come to check on you," I whisper. "I wonder how long he's been standing out there."

Gwen bites down on my shoulder to muffle her laugh, and a fit of giggles rolls through me. She presses her hand over my mouth. "Shhh."

She holds it there until we hear their boots retreating on the deck, and we gasp for air as soon as they're gone. Gwen rests her head on my chest, and I rub her back. My eyelids are growing heavy, and all I can think about is how this sweetness is exactly what I would take and keep forever if I could. I pay no mind to the hourglass as I drift off to sleep.

MORGEN

Despite my wishing and hours spent cursing the hourglass on my desk, it turns out I can't stop the flow of time. I stare at the dwindling grains, only wanting a handful of them back so that I can replay the past five days of living as though Gwendolyn is my matey and we have our whole lives ahead of us. Five days of playing pretend so well that even the harsh northern winds couldn't bother us in our bed.

"Skye will be back soon," she says, tugging on the latches of the small leather suitcase we're sharing. It's stuffed with her meager belongings and a few of my most valuable items. Everything that's mine will be hers in two days.

"I know. I'm almost ready." I button the collar of the blouse over my neck and smooth the ruffles down to conceal my scales. It's the same outfit I was wearing the night I met Snow—the only attire I have that's suitable for visiting the palace. Our journey has come full circle, but now that we've arrived at this abrupt ending, there's a pit in my stomach that could swallow the kingdom of Gentrilly. I chase a shot of rum down with ice-cold water in an attempt to fill the hole. I should be grateful that we've made it here without Cosette causing any trouble.

Stuffing a couple of daggers beneath the waistband of my skirt, I steal a glance at Snow. She's just as beautiful in the sunrise as she is under the glow of the moon. I was merely existing until I got to watch her bloom like a moonflower with the pale blue light of her magic for six weeks.

She worries that no one will love her, but I know she'll have no shortage of suitors once she makes her debut at court. I finger the handle of my blade, trying not to let the thought bother me. I need to cut all ties

before the clock strikes midnight on my birthday so that I can toss my heart to the tide in peace.

“I should fetch Jacques.” She stands near the door, wringing her hands. “Do you think he’ll be safe around the queen with that brand on his arm? He told me not to fret about what I saw in the nightmare realm, that it was only a dream, but I’m afraid for him.”

I’m not sure any of us are truly safe around Queen Isobel without certain precautions in place. Including Snow. That’s why I’m escorting her there myself.

There’ll be no reward if she’s offed the moment she arrives.

“He’ll be safer with you there to champion him,” I say, tucking another knife into my boot. “I don’t think the threat of the hangman’s noose could stop him from seeing you get to the palace in one piece at this point.”

“It’ll be good to have him with me.” She touches the pink scar on her throat, not letting her eyes land on me. She’s been careful to keep her emotions contained since I told her that I need to know she’ll be ok. “It’ll be like having a piece of home with me when I start to long for the sea.”

The pit in my belly opens into a gaping canyon when I think of Snow in her old age, longing for the days she spent sailing with me. One day this will all be an adventure, a wistful memory for her to look back on, and I hope she’ll remember me. Some part of me will live on with her. She sweeps to the door, and I collapse on the bed when she’s gone, holding my head in my hands for a few rounds of breath before I head out.

I welcome the bitter wind that steals my breath and brings me back to my senses. This is the reality of my life. I’ve taken what I wanted for days, and now it’s time to remember that none of it can be permanent. I was always meant for the sea.

I nearly bump into Skye as they’re boarding the ship. Their arms are piled high with fur-lined fabrics and ribbon-wrapped boxes. I lift a few to ease the burden.

“I see you had a productive shopping excursion while you were supposed to be scouting the city.”

I’d have ventured out myself, but with the funeral processions taking place I wanted to make sure it was safe to enter the kingdom before rowing Snow to shore.

“I had a few hours to spare after I scouted the city—there are no major safety concerns, by the way,” they say. “You can’t blame me for getting

some shopping in. There's nothing quite as luxurious as Gentrillian's finery."

Their hair is swept up on the sides by two oyster clips, showing off a new set of pearl earrings dangling from sparkling gold chains. I point to them.

"Those are lovely."

"I got you something too," they say, pointing their chin at the box at the top of my pile. I open it and tear the perfumed paper to find silver hoop earrings lying on top of a black velvet coat with silver buttons.

"These are too fine for me," I murmur.

"You can't show up to the castle looking like a pirate." Their cocky grin grows. "Besides, I thought it'd be funny for you to be wearing Lavinsar's colors when you throw our captive at the queen's feet. I can't wait to get Admiral Daniels off the ship. He always looks like he's plotting something."

The admiral unnerves me too, but he'll be Queen Isobel's problem to deal with soon. Skye looks past me and lifts the rest of the boxes in Snow's direction as she rounds the corner with Jacques. "And these are for you!"

"What's all this?" Snow asks, opening a box and pulling out a hooded red velvet cape with white fur at the cuffs. She ties it on over the brown jacket she's stolen from me.

"A little parting gift," Skye says. "Cook and a few others pitched in to repay you for all of the tinctures you made."

"Oh, I was happy to have something to keep me busy," she says earnestly and tugs on a green satin ribbon wrapped around a small box. Her lips smack together when she sees the rows of colorful ovals inside. "Candied grapes! My favorite! I know you love anything grape-flavored," she says, dropping a purple candy in Jacques' palm before picking out one of the blue sweets. "You even got blue raspberry!"

"I had to get blue raspberry. It's always the best flavor." Skye takes one from the box.

"Blue raspberries don't exist," I say flatly. Skye and Snow look at me as if I've told them I've murdered a puppy.

"Yes they do!" they exclaim at the same time.

"They were sold in all the markets before the fae realm was sealed off," Skye says, twirling their candy between two fingers. "Now the

confectioners keep the magical memory of its taste alive.”

“Didn’t you say King Morrow controls the portal to the fae realm?” Snow asks. “What if we paid Cordelia to smuggle some of the berries in for us? We could make a killing!”

“You’re a genius.” Skye taps their chin. “I might have to talk to her about it.”

“Don’t forget about me if you strike a deal with her.”

“How could I forget about you, fishbone? You’ll be in a perfect position to commit such crimes; you’ll only need to ask for a royal pardon if you’re caught.”

Jacques mutters something about contraband in the castle while I sulk over the conversation. Snow grabs another one of the grapes coated in blue-raspberry candy. “Why don’t you try one instead of brooding over there?”

“You know I don’t eat sweets.”

She rolls her eyes and presses the candy between my lips. “Today you do. Go ahead. Eat your sweets. *Be ruthless.*”

My teeth crack through the crunchy surface. It’s perfectly sweet and sour just like her, with a juicy center that bursts on my tongue. I have to work to swallow it down past the lump in my throat. I might spend an eternity deep beneath the sea, my mouth filled with blood and briny water, but I know I will never stop searching for another taste of this moment.

“Didn’t you want to see Cook for a minute?” Jacques asks. Snow gives me a small smile before nodding.

“Yes, we want to exchange some notes before I leave, but there’s one more thing I need to do.” She throws her arms around Skye. “Thank you for all of your help. I think I’ll miss you the most.”

Snow snuffles as she walks off with Jacques, and I’m left standing alone with Skye.

“What was that about, oh ruthless one?” They smile and shake their head when I don’t answer. Sighing, they look out to the shore in the distance where Gentrilly’s royal city is preparing for a funeral. “You know you need to declare her arrival publicly, right?”

“Yes.” I’ve already considered the politics of the matter. We need witnesses. Gwen must be seen, alive and well. “Otherwise, it’ll be too easy for the queen to get rid of her if she finds her presence to be inconvenient.”

“Hmm,” Skye agrees with their jaw set tight. “Or we could just keep sailing.”

I tense and grip the boxes, so I won’t drop them as a scene of us sailing right past Gentrilly plays in my mind. “What?”

“Don’t act coy about it. You can say you claimed her as your matey as a ruse all you want, but I see how you look at her. Fuck. You *laugh* when you’re with her.”

“We can’t just keep sailing,” I mutter. *But wouldn’t I if I could?* “The crew will be pissed if I break our agreement.”

“If you’re worried about the money, we can find other ways to fill our coffers.”

“The Moon Coven will never stop trying to find her.”

“We could rest in Corstyliia for a few months and let things die down. It’s easier to hide out there.” They shrug. “Her whole life shouldn’t be spent behind castle walls or locked up in a temple with skeletons for company. She acts like one of us; she’ll be a damn fish out of water in that palace. If you tell us to sail on and help you to keep her safe, we’ll all have your back. It’s nice to have an official healer on board.”

They stare expectantly, slivers of amusement shining in their eyes because they think it’s a reasonable option. But they don’t know the truth of my curse and what’s at stake. I can’t alter the course of fate any further.

“Were the caves clear when you scoped them out?”

“Yes, but Captain—” Their face drops with disappointment when I hold up a hand to cut off their speech.

“That’s all I need to know. The boat will return in two days, and the reward is to be split evenly amongst the crew.”

I’ll be deep beneath the ocean by then, swimming back to Cosette’s cove to answer her call. If Skye responds, their words are taken by the wind. There should be a proper farewell between us. Aside from Harri, I’ve known them longer than anyone else.

Nostalgia nips up my throat. If Harri was still here, Skye could accompany us to the palace. I’d have their company for a while longer. But Harri is gone, and I’ll have to leave without saying goodbye. These ties to my life will feel frayed at the ends, no matter how I try to cut them.

When it’s time to move on, just keep pushing forward.

I take my father’s advice and block out the noise of Snow’s goodbyes and promises to write to the crew as I pull on my new jacket and plait my

hair back. The hour passes, and I tug on the binds between Admiral Daniels' hands, guiding him to the rowboat. Getting to Gentrilly safely and claiming a treasure that will seal my legacy is my only concern now.

But the boat rocks when Snow climbs in to take her seat, and I can't stop my heart from jumping when I see the waves of her brown hair blowing past her wind burnt cheeks.

Enough, I tell myself. You've taken what you wanted from her, and it'll have to be enough.

"If I may make a suggestion," Admiral Daniels says as Sampson and Griff pile in on the benches.

"You may not," I answer, and Skye lowers the harpoon down to me.

"It's only that it's nesting season for the afanc," the admiral continues. "You might consider untying my hands in case you need my assistance."

"Absolutely not." I lean the weapon against my shoulder and grab an oar.

"The path was clear when I ventured out earlier," Skye adds. "There shouldn't be an issue."

"And if one arises, three of us are armed. No harm will come to you on this journey," I assure the admiral. His face is chalky from days spent in the cell, but it pales even further when he looks out to the fortified towers of the palace in the distance. I can't guarantee his safety once he's in the queen's grasp.

"Goodbye, and be well!" Snow calls back to the ship. Her fingers are curled around the oar she's sharing with Jacques. I don't like how her knee touches the admiral's thigh, but it's the only seating arrangement that works.

I exchange one last glance with Skye. I can tell they suspect Queen Isobel won't be overjoyed by our surprise visit.

"Take care," I whisper before I dig my oar into the water and pull away from *The Ruined Soul*. I keep my eyes on my knuckles, not looking at the name shimmering on the side of the ship, lest a sliver of homesickness tries to lodge itself into my heart.

I'll feel at home beneath the sea.

"Whoa, Captain. You're wearing us out already," Sampson says, smiling as his oar flips up and sprays backsplash.

"It is a vigorous pace," Jacques adds, huffing as Snow rows along with him. He eyes her hands but keeps his mouth shut about her calluses and

herb-stained nail beds. I think he's finally learned that she won't sit still for anyone.

"The sooner we get there, the faster we can—" The boat lurches, bumping over a mass that makes us all lean to the port side. "Just a bit of coral or an old barrel," I say, letting the blade of my oar lie flat to skim over the water.

"Captain." Jacques presses a hand to his chest, and I catch the panic in his eyes. A splash near the stern has me reaching for the harpoon. I dig my boots into the guts of the boat to brace myself and hold my finger on the trigger, waiting.

A spiky row of scales snakes through the water, disrupting the calm ripple of the ocean. I squeeze one eye shut, preparing for the worst, but hoping the beast will keep swimming away. I roll my shoulder back, not letting my hands shake as its tail smacks against the waves and circles back toward us. It's moving so fast; I know I'll only get one shot. My aim needs to be perfect.

The afanc raises its furry head a few feet from us, revealing rows of sharp teeth and two long tusks as it roars. It's a disturbing creature—a cross between some sea mammal and a prehistoric serpent with the elongated snout of a crocodile and the face of a beaver. It snakes up through the water and shoots several feet forward before diving back down. It rises again, leaving its neck vulnerable for a split second. I aim for its gills, and the harpoon pierces through the scaly flesh of its neck.

The afanc howls in pain, rearing up twice and lashing out with its webbed claws as Griff shoots through its eye. The boat tilts, and I have to grip the gunnel to keep from tumbling overboard. *Shit*. There must be more of the beasts, but I can only address one at a time.

"Someone handle it!" I shout above the chaos. I'm too close to the creature's maw to turn away. Its breath reeks of rancid fish and coppery blood.

"Let go!" Snow cries, but I can't turn back to help her now.

I'm watching the afanc's uvula reverberate when a bullet flies into its mouth. It thrashes and bucks, nearly toppling onto the boat before falling back and crashing heavily into the water. I'm knocked onto my back, sprawled out on the bench as Sampson jumps over my legs. My head hits the wood.

“Where’s the other afanc?” I ask and grab my pistol, but no one is looking out into the water. They’re all wrestling near Snow. Only her yellow skirt is visible between a tangle of trousered legs. I spot the blood smears on the bench where she was sitting. I scream her name and watch as Griff pulls Admiral Daniels back by his grey ponytail. The admiral’s face and wrists are bloodied, but he grins as Sampson’s knuckles collide with his mouth.

If he hurt her... Everything slows down. My hand goes to the dagger in my waistband before I can think of the curse or remember my reasoning for keeping her safe. I only know that I can’t bear the thought of a world without Gwendolyn in it. I lunge for the admiral just as Jacques’ blade plunges into his throat.

“You got him, Jacques!” Snow says. Her voice is still strained with fear. The boat sways as Admiral Daniels falls to his knees. “You saved my life.”

“Happy to serve you, my lady.” Jacques presses a hand to his abdomen. His grey jacket is turning black between his fingers, darkening with blood. I see the mortal wound before anyone else does.

“What just happened?” Sampson asks. “That was madness. He stole one of your damn knives, Jacques. What a little shit.”

“I guess he figured he was going to take her down with him,” Griff says. The admiral chokes and writhes. No one bends to assist him or put him out of his misery. “Shifty bastard. Must have hurt to wriggle out of his binds like that. Hope it did.”

Jacques groans, and Snow places her hand on his bicep.

“What is it?”

“It’s nothing,” he says, but I watch her chest rise as she catches sight of the blood seeping through his fingers.

“No.” She presses her hands over the wound to slow the bleeding. “Please, no. I need you to come with me.”

“I wish I could.”

“You can.” She pushes the cap back to stroke his thin hair off his forehead. The current rises beneath the boat, stirring with her distress. “I can help you.”

“Gwen, don’t,” I caution as she lifts her hand. A spray of salty water splashes over the hull. Jacques shakes his head.

“Listen to the captain,” he says and curls his hand over her fingers as a small blue light forms in her palm. “Be careful who you reveal yourself to.” The water stills. Snow’s dutiful guard, my friendly kitchen hand—he knows her secret. “I swore a vow, but you need to know.” He gulps for air and wheezes on blood. “The circumstances of your birth...She wanted to protect you...I understand.” His eyes roll back. “Would’ve walked right back in the castle with you anyways. Just wanted to see you safe...”

“Shh,” she soothes him through his ramblings. “It’s ok.” She presses her lips close to his ear. “I’ll be safe. I promise. But I’ll miss you forever, my loyal knight. My dear friend.”

Tears gather in the lined pockets beneath his eyes before spilling down his cheeks.

“Go be with Elinor,” she says and kisses his forehead as he shudders his last breath.

The admiral wears a grim smile as he bleeds out, satisfied by Snow’s pain. Rage pounds against my skull. I lift my knife and stab it into his stomach, where I know it’ll hurt.

“Fuck you.” I pull it out, ready to do it again and make him pay for taking away Snow’s one friend and ruining everything. Snow catches my elbow. She’s staring at the sharp black nails tearing through the leather of my left glove. I tighten my grip around the handle to hide the new claws. I want to become the fearful creature threatening to take over my body so I can rip this man apart, but it’s not time for that. I need to get her to the queen before I lose myself.

“Morgen, let him bleed.” She stares down at Daniels. “The other afancs might wake up and get hungry.”

“No.” The admiral gags, growing pale from more than the blood loss as Griff lifts him up by the shoulders.

“You should have behaved,” I lecture, but his death warrant was signed the day we fucked up his plans to capture Gwen. Between Queen Isobel and the High Priestess, he never stood a chance.

Sampson grabs the man’s ankles and Griff adjusts his grip to hold him around the wrists. They count to three as they swing his body and heave him over the side of the boat. Snow closes Jacques’ eyelids and folds his arms over his chest.

“Jacques was a good person,” Sampson says.

“He worked hard,” Griff adds. “He always took it on the chin when someone had something nasty to say.”

“Jacques was loyal to his kingdom until the very end. He gladly gave his life to protect his princess.” I take one of the emergency blankets from under the bench and throw it over his body. I wait for Snow to say a few words, but she’s white-knuckling the gunnel and staring into the depths of the sea like she’s going to be ill.

“Snow.”

She doesn’t respond. Her eyes are glazed and set on something I can’t see. I’ve seen that hypnotized look on her face before. On the night we met, I thought she might throw herself overboard, and on that night Harri took her from her cabin, she looked like she was going to fling herself out into the sea. I press my palm between her shoulder blades, and she shivers as the trance breaks.

“It’s going to be all right, Gwen,” I comfort her. It’s a thin promise, but she nods all the same and moves back to the center of the bench.

She twists her fingers in her lap as we toss Jacques into the water. We row in silence until we reach the rocky shoreline where the afancs’ lake drains to the sea. Most people stay away from the area to avoid the creatures, so it’s empty when we push the boat up the stone glass beach and into the cave we always use as a hideout in Gentrilly.

I wipe Admiral Daniels’ blood from my face with a damp handkerchief, and Snow fixes my hair. Water drips steadily from grey stalactites into a small pool that will fill when the tide rushes in. This is where I’ll spend my birthday. I scrape my talon down the dark rock wall and stuff my hand into my pocket so that no one will see what I’m becoming.

At least I’ll be free in the sea. I’ll be able to swim and do as I please as long as I keep Cosette plied with souls. And I’ll be rid of this sick feeling that slides up my throat when I see how fragile Gwen looks—as delicate as the thin-winged insects that swarm through my stomach every time I see her.

“Are you ready?” she asks me, pulling the furry hood over her head.

“Yes, do you need a moment to talk before we go?”

“No,” she says, moving to the mouth of the cave. “I can’t speak of it.”

“We’ll be keeping lookout here like you said,” Griff says. “See you soon.”

Snow leans into me and startles before taking a step away. The city sprawls around the castle. Each building is placed to frame the palace and let its key features shine all the way through to the coastline. Black banners roll out of latticed windows, covering swaths of cream buildings. On them, there are portraits of a woman lying on a pillow of roses. A disk of a moon is stitched above her head, and at the bottom, there is an epitaph: *Gods rest the would-be princess.*

“I guess this is it,” she says, grimacing at the rendition of her face staring all around us. “My new home in Gentrilly.”

Mine until Gentrilly. The day of our arrival has come far too soon for my liking, but I’m starting to think that no amount of time could have prepared me for how much it would hurt to say goodbye.

Mine until Gentrilly, and I will see that she gets back to her mother. For the reward, and for my own selfish need to see her safe. I will be ruthless in getting what I want before I return to the sea.

GWEN

I fight a wave of nausea as the Kingdom of Gentrilly rises around me. It's as though I'm stepping into the pages of an illustrated storybook and seeing all of the sharp details that the artist chose to blur and soften for the sake of a pretty picture.

I'm disoriented by the sight of children in rags crisscrossing between the alleyways to avoid horse-drawn carriages. The sea breeze is lost to the scent of cooked food and piles of horse shit being shoveled by frail men to clear paths around the shops. Most of the buildings are short and square, but there are so many of them.

Everything is loud—the sounds, the colors, the taste of smoke that sits in the air.

I'm more ungrounded than I was during those first few days on the ocean. It took me some time to find my sea legs, but this is worse. There's no peppermint tea to calm my stomach or my nerves. There's no Jacques to check in on me.

I blink hard to force the tears back.

The further we walk into the city, the easier it is to breathe. The pounding at my temples eases into a dull metronome as I move away from the sea, but I can still feel the eerie call of the tide. After Jacques died, my magic tugged me toward the water's surface. I've felt that pull before when I was frightened, but this time I heard an uncanny lullaby beckoning me to jump in. I almost did until Morgen pulled me back.

She touches my shoulder now, breaking the string of muddled whispering in my ears.

“And I thought they were making a fuss over you in Seshly,” she says. The edge of her mouth curls up as she jerks her thumb toward a crowd gathering to purchase a tapestry woven with a bloody scene where a guard dressed in ivory armor slays a maiden dressed in white. The vendor holds up her artwork and raises the price point each time someone offers up their coin.

“Oh heavens, that’s dreadful,” I say. Morgen throws her hand over her forehead and lolls her tongue to mock the image. How can her eyes still sparkle with amusement when she knows what will happen when the sand in her hourglass runs out? I can’t even get my thoughts to settle knowing I’m waltzing into a future surrounded by royal privilege.

I’ve been trying to show her that I’ll be ok. If she can put on a brave face for her future, then so can I. I won’t be the one who sends her to the jars, even if I fear I’ll never feel as safe as I do when I’m by her side. I’ll tamp down on my emotions until I’m safe and settled, and then I’ll figure out the next step.

We follow the strip of rose quartz gravel leading to the palace, and Morgen waves a hand for us to huddle between two buildings. We go unnoticed in the shadows as people stride by dressed in the finest fashions, most of which I haven’t seen yet. The wealthiest nobles are queuing before the drawbridge.

“We’ll have to act as arrogant as this bunch, or they’ll realize we’re up to something,” she says.

I clasp my cloak to cover myself, but it’s not just my plain dress that has me feeling out of place. The castle maintains the fairytale splendor of my dreams, with its cream towers and manicured gardens full of blood-red flowers that match the parapets. When the sun moves at a certain angle, it hits the sheer wash brushed over the white brick walls, creating a dazzling rosy sheen.

As a child, I used to trace over its picture, but I could never convince myself that I’d been born in the rose quartz palace, that it was meant to be my home at one point.

“I have no idea what to say to the queen,” I admit. My palms are sweating already.

“Let me do the talking.” Morgen ushers me back to the main road. “Everything will be fine once we’ve announced your arrival.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to throw me to the guards and tell them who I am? Surely they’d rush us straight to the right place.”

Morgen gives one sharp shake of her head. “No. Don’t reveal yourself to anyone until you’re before your mother.”

She’s stubbornly sticking to her plan and dragging things out. It’s fine with me. I’m content with being Snow for a few hours longer. I’m not ready to be Gwendolyn the would-be princess or whatever they’ll call me once I’m behind those walls.

I reach for Morgen out of habit as we file into the line behind a couple carrying a small dog in a gem-encrusted tote bag, but her hands are tucked deep into her pockets. I clutch my elbows instead, remembering the way her nails protruded through her gloves back on the boat. I wonder if it hurts. I want to touch her and wrap my healing light around her fingers.

Candied grapes roll around my empty stomach. I’m glad I skipped breakfast this morning. I wouldn’t be able to keep it down as the memories of the day replay in my mind. I see the afanc, Morgen gripping the knife, and Jacques’ dead eyes every time I close mine.

“We’re moving forward.” Morgen’s elbow bumps my ribs. Her eyebrows knit together when she sees me hugging my arms around myself. “Oh. Damn it all.”

Pursing her lips, she grabs my hand and stuffs it into her pocket. Our fingers twine together in a way that feels familiar now. She doesn’t let go of me as we squeeze through the entrance.

My boots squeak on the pink-flecked marble floors as we enter the castle. People stop to gawk at the old portraits hanging on the walls, causing a bottleneck in the narrow hall. Strong perfumes and bouquets of funeral lilies overwhelm the tight space. When we finally pass the rose-colored arches that open out into the main area of the castle, I take a deep breath, wishing I could fill my lungs with the salty ocean air.

“We’re here,” Morgen whispers. There’s another line ahead of us, but now everyone has their head dropped down to stare at their shoes. I lift my chin to see ahead of the crowd and spot two women sitting side-by-side in thrones raised upon a dais.

Queen Isobel and Princess Briallen. My mother. My sister. Their blood flows through my veins, but I study them the way I would a stranger. They share similar features—round, fair-skinned faces and golden-brown hair. But the older woman has grey hair threaded through the crown of braids

that twists around her tiara. The princess' curls are pinned up and covered with a thin black veil that hangs behind her head. Their matching black velvet gowns dip low, revealing slim, small-busted figures. I may have been born first, but my sister looks like she was meant to take my mother's role.

Anxiety kicks at my sides. What am I supposed to say? *Hello, Mother. Or, I've always wanted to meet you, dear sister. Shall we braid each other's hair?*

"I'm going to present you and have you request a reward and pardon for the crew. This is where I'll have to leave you," Morgen says. Her breath tickles against my ear. I hold her hand tight. *Yours until Gentrilly*, but here we are, and I don't want to let go. "Please be well and remember who you are."

I force my fingers loose from our grip. I won't hold her back, but I'll never let her go. Not really. A plan is taking root in my heart.

We step before the dais. Princess Briallen jiggles her leg and taps her fingers on the clawed arms of the throne. The queen's mouth turns down when I throw my hood back. She doesn't recognize me. And why would she? She's never seen me up close. I look more like a peasant from the city than a pretty painting of myself.

All of the etiquettes I've rehearsed for this moment fly from my mind. I cup my hands below my heart and scoop my palms upward in Lavinsar's customary show of respect because it's all I can remember.

"Your majesty," Morgen greets Queen Isobel with a deep curtsy. My mother's eyes stay fixed on me, waiting. I tremble as I tuck my foot behind my ankle.

"I've come to pay respects," Morgen says, still postured close to the ground. "I've come bearing the greatest gift I could think of."

"Gifts are to be left in the hall," the queen says. "Next."

"I think you might make an exception to receive this one," Morgen says, speaking loud enough for everyone to hear. "We've traveled all the way from Lavinsar to return your daughter, Gwendolyn, safe and sound."

The princess leans forward, openly studying my face. Murmurs ripple through the crowd. A faery's gossamer wings beat in the corner of my eye as they turn to their companion to whisper about my arrival.

My mother doesn't jump from the throne or rush to me as I imagined. She doesn't stand or even fidget to take a closer look at me. There's only a

slight flare of her nostrils before she asks, “Is this some sort of prank?”

“I assure you it is not,” Morgen replies when I take too long to answer. She rises before the queen gives her permission.

“Your accent is Corstylian, yet you wear Lavinsar’s colors,” Queen Isobel says. “Explain yourself. Where does your allegiance lie?”

“I call no kingdom home. I only swear allegiance to the tides.”

The queen slides her eyes to me. “And how is it that you’re alive when we were informed of your death weeks ago? Did you not think to write and tell me of your survival?” She lifts a single finger. “It would have saved us plenty of time and money on these processions.”

The banquet hall falls silent. I need to explain the whole thing. If she hears my story, she’ll understand.

“Mother—” My tongue sticks on the word. I’ve never called anyone that before. It’s too quiet in here, and everyone is watching me. There are eyes all over my back. I glance over my shoulder, seeking the comfort of Jacques’ presence, but he’s not there. He’s gone forever. There’s no buffer between me and all of these strange faces. Some I recognize from royal portraits—kings, queens, royal heirs, and even monarchs from the fae realm. They’ve all come to mourn me, but they know nothing about me.

“Being the military genius that you are, I’m sure you understand that we needed to keep Sn—Gwendolyn’s whereabouts secret for security purposes,” Morgen fills in the gaps that I cannot. “I’m sure Gwendolyn will be happy to share the details of her journey in private.”

“We’ll speak of it later, then.” She points her scepter at Morgen. “Who is your brave companion, Gwendolyn?”

“This is Morgen.” My captain stares at me, attempting to fortify me with courage from a distance. I know how important her legacy is to her. Now I see a chance to ensure that our names will be written together in the history texts. “She’s the captain of *The Ruined Soul*. My hero.” I take a deep breath, swelling with excitement to say two words in front of this crowd. “My matey.”

I don’t think anyone is breathing. Even with all of these people crammed in one place, I could hear a pin drop.

“You traveled here with a *pirate*?”

“She saved my life.”

Queen Isobel’s mouth twitches into a tight smile. “How lovely.”

Scattered whispers break the silence. Gossip swirls through the air. “What a joyous occasion you’re all witnessing today. My daughter has returned to us. Tomorrow’s mourning ceremony will now be canceled, and a ball will be held in its place. You’re all invited to attend the grandest celebration of the century!”

The cheering erupts so loudly that I have to strain to hear as my mother calls us forward.

“I don’t really need a ball.” I stand at the foot of the platform, craning my neck.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Many of these people traveled a great distance to mourn you,” she clips out. “They’ll expect *something*.”

“I’ll send for the florist and have these awful lilies swapped out with fresh roses.” Princess Briallen rings a bell beside her throne. Maids scurry up the aisle to answer her call. “At least the food preparations have already been made. But we’ll need to find you clothes that don’t smell like fish guts. And a beautician. What happened to your hair, Gwendolyn? It’s quite unbecoming. How could you present yourself at court like this?”

I rake my hand through my chin-length waves. The *thwip* of Shiloh’s sword is sharp in my memory.

“Her journey hasn’t been easy, but Gwen’s beauty shines no matter what,” Morgen says. It’s brazen of her to contradict the princess’s statement, but I wrap up the compliment and tuck it deep within my heart. I’ll keep it with me when I have to continue down this path without her.

“It appears my daughter is comely enough to capture the attention of a pirate at least.” The queen uncrosses her legs and lifts a golden goblet to her lips. She doesn’t sound pleased. “There’s much to be done to prepare for tomorrow.”

“But—” A ball seems so frivolous now. I need to speak to her about pressing matters. People are smearing Shiloh’s good name. Grimhilde might be watching through royal mirrors, plotting to wreck us all. And the worst part is Morgen only has a limited amount of time before she’s called to the sea forever.

“Until tomorrow.” Queen Isobel dismisses us and signals to two of her guards. “Take them to the spare suite in the princess’ wing.”

Portraits of my ancestors sit in the dark halls we wind through. They look down on us, judging with unsmiling faces as if they can tell I think their customs are strange and uninviting. In my heart, I know that no place

will ever make me feel at home the way the hand resting on my low back does.

The guards lead us to the suite.

“Here you are, your—” The man’s brown eyes drop over my bedraggled attire. He doesn’t know how to address me. No one does. I’m one of the most famous women in the world, but I have no crown or title. He clears his throat. “We’ll be outside if you need us.”

His stern offer of assistance is a blow to my heart. Jacques was always so pleasant to be around. He called me *my lady* before he even knew who my family was.

Morgen follows into the room behind me. Sunlight streams through stained glass windows, casting shards of multi-colored lights on the sheer white canopy hanging over the four-post bed. I press my fingers to the cold glass and trace the outline of a bluebird trapped in a golden cage.

The space is too wide and open for me to feel comfortable. I already dread the nights alone. I have no interest in exploring as Morgen checks the place out.

“No secret passageways or anything to worry about,” she says. “You’ll be safe here.” I hear the bolt slide in the door and feel her presence behind me. I close my eyes, anticipating her hands around my waist, but I know those days of touching so freely are over.

“I’m sorry.” My breath fogs the glass, casting a sad cloud over the poor bluebird’s head. “I didn’t mean for you to get delayed here.”

“It’s all right. I’ll leave for the shore as soon as I can.”

“That didn’t go the way I planned it. My mother wasn’t moved at all by my arrival. I didn’t even get a chance to ask her to repay you.”

“I wasn’t exactly expecting her to throw a bag of gold at my feet.” Morgen’s fingers land at the nape of my neck in a tentative touch that sends a shiver down my spine. “Family can be disappointing, but you can’t let them bring you down. You know who you are.”

But do I? I’m a princess without a title, a devotee without a temple, a healer without any patients to tend to, and a lover about to lose my only shred of intimacy. Her finger trails down to the base of my spine, and her lips find their way to my neck.

“I love your light. Don’t ever let them steal it from you.”

Magic stirs in my veins, rising with a rush of desire that pools between my thighs. We shouldn’t be touching like this. We should be working on letting go, but she’s telling me she loves something about me, and I want to twist into her, knowing it will be excruciating when she walks away.

“And I won’t let them steal your memory from me either,” I tell her, turning in her arms and backing up against the cold stone wall. “That’s why I claimed you as my matey in front of all of those royals. I want them to know I sailed alongside you.”

“That was quite improper of you,” she says, but I can sense her smile. “I’m sure the queen is fuming.” She flicks her tongue beneath my jaw and pushes her skirts up to slip her knee between mine. I hitch up my gown, spreading my legs and sinking down the wall to grind against her thigh as I hold on tight to her. My hands run over the handles of her daggers and the straps of leather around her slim hips that hold them in place. I’ll miss this. I’ll never know another woman as fierce as Morgen.

“I refuse to keep it a secret for the sake of court politics. I only made you mine as you made me yours.”

My head is humming with pleasure, dulling my anxiety. If I could just stay in this moment forever...

Two loud knocks send me grasping for Morgen’s shoulders. We both stare at the door where the bolt is rattling in its slot.

“Her Royal Highness, Princess Briallen demands an audience with her...” The guard clears his throat. “Sister.”

I groan in frustration. Morgen straightens my gown before adjusting her own skirts. I tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear and brush my knuckles over the blush on her cheeks. She leans into the touch and pulls away to answer the door.

I stand up straight, trying to look at ease when my sister enters the room, but I'm unnerved by how real she looks in person. She stands half a head taller than me, and her shoulders stay relaxed down her back. Everyone here answers to her, and she knows it.

The heavy material of her black gown gathers around her feet as she takes a seat at the vanity mirror across from the bed. Snapping her fingers, she calls for the maid to pour the tea before turning to me.

"Welcome to the castle, sister," Briallen greets me. A grey-haired woman dressed in a beige wool gown pours hot water into a delicate teacup. The princess flicks her fingers at the guards and the maid. "Leave us."

Steam rises as she lifts the drink to take a sip. My magic tingles, wanting to rub up against the condensation gathering on the rim. "You've made quite a memorable entrance. I see you have a flair for drama."

"It wasn't intentional," I say, clasping my hands. "I would've preferred a quiet meeting."

"Mmm," she hums in disbelief. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm seeking the safety of my family's home," I answer, trying to recover from the blunt impact of her question. "I had to leave Lavinsar after what happened."

"Yes, it sounds like it was a terrible ordeal." She smirks at Morgen. "Seems like you've moved on from your squabble with the guard."

"It wasn't a squabble." Hot tea splashes over the side of her cup. I take a deep breath to cool my nerves. "Shiloh wasn't like that. Grimhilde ordered her to kill me, but she didn't."

Briallen's eyes shift to the door. "Keep your voice down."

"I need to clear her name, or everyone will think—"

She slams the cup down in its saucer and leaves it rattling on the dresser. "Stop it. Stop talking." Morgen presses her hip against me as the princess steps closer. "You can't come here and speak without thinking."

"But it's the truth," I hiss. "The guard spared me, and I traveled across the sea to get here. *The Ruined Soul's* crew made sure I got here safely, even when the Moon Coven sent people after me."

"The truth doesn't matter," she states. "If you give our mother a good reason to start a conflict with the High Priestess, she'll happily plunge the world into another drawn-out war. You had a role to play, and you

abandoned it. The fragile peace between our two kingdoms is breaking down because of you.”

Because of me. There has always been something wrong with me. I wreak havoc wherever I go.

“Then what should I tell her?”

“I don’t know. Tell her you ran away from the guard after she did something horrible to you. Tell her you played dead.” Strong, bashful Shiloh will be remembered as a villain if I don’t speak up. It’s a horrible stain to leave on her memory. “Or better yet, leave this place. If you think the people of Gentrilly will drop to their knees for you, you’re mistaken. I’ve worked too hard for you to try to claim a title that never belonged to you.”

Prisms of light bounce off her golden eyelashes as she waits for my response. Any hope of finding comfort in my sibling is gone, shattered by her threatened stare. If she could get rid of me herself, I know she would.

“I’ve never had any desire to wear your crown,” I say truthfully.

“Even if you did, the people would never let you take it. Everyone knows there must have been something horribly wrong with you for the queen to have agreed to such vile terms with the High Priestess. Who gives up their heir without a fight?” Each one of her words hits me like a slap in the face. “What secret are you hiding, sister? Is it true what they say? Do you have tentacles in your private spots?”

“That’s enough,” Morgen growls. “You might be the princess, but you’re not allowed to speak to my matey like that.”

Princess Briallen’s cheeks flush scarlet. She’s probably never had anyone speak so harshly to her. I fear she’ll call for her guards and have us thrown out, but she seems thoroughly shamed by Morgen’s outburst.

She narrows her eyes. “There shouldn’t be any trouble as long as you keep quiet.”

I nod. I can curl up and keep quiet. I can turn inward and soak up my surroundings until I figure out a way to leave this place and find safety somewhere else. Let them all believe I’m as silly as they think I am.

I throw my arms around Morgen as soon as the princess is gone. I don’t care that we’re in Gentrilly, or that we’ll have to say goodbye soon. I’m still hers. I think I always will be. I need to breathe her in and commit her scent to memory.

“Your sister is afraid of you,” she says. “Be careful around her, but don’t forget that fear in her eyes. She knows she can’t harm you without repercussions. Learn to apply pressure when you need to.”

She tips my chin up for a kiss, and I try not to think of how she’s giving me advice on how to survive this court without her. My tongue grazes the tip of hers, and heat swells inside me. I push it down. The hours are passing by too quickly.

“Not now.” I step back, panting. “I have to try one more thing before your time is up.”

“I’d rather spend the time *with* you.”

“Come with me,” I say, running to find the guards in the hall so they can point me in the right direction.

“Where are we going?”

“To the library.”

A foolish burst of hope makes my steps feel light as we race down the halls of the palace.



PAINTED cherubs fly across vaulted ceilings that are held up by marble pillars trimmed in gold. Ladders line the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. The spaces between the shelves form a dizzying maze interrupted by statues of gods and the heroes of old legends. Recesses in the walls are filled with cushions to form little reading nooks. The librarian was appalled by our appearances but reluctantly gave me the keys when the guards confirmed my identity.

“I know the answer to our problem is in here somewhere,” I say, rubbing my hands together.

My voice bounces around the space. Morgen crosses her arms and leans back against a bookshelf. A *History of Merpeople* is printed on the spine next to her shoulder. She doesn’t look as hopeful as I feel about this plan. “Perhaps we should start out with the section on sirens and make our way to forbidden curses.”

“Snow.”

“Hopefully they don’t keep those texts under lock and key.”

“Snow, we don’t have to do this.”

“Here’s one.” I go to the shelf across from her and pluck out a book titled *The Lore of the Sirens*. Flipping it open, I skim through illustrations of the deadly, beautiful creatures and catch snippets of stories about young girls who were raised by fishermen before returning to the sea to embrace their true nature. I stop on a full-page image of a siren lying on a rock. Her silvery hair glows beneath a full moon, and her eyes are shut, making her sharp features appear nearly human in her resting state.

I read the passage on the opposite page aloud.

“Sirens are drawn to the light of the full moon. Sailors often find they’re able to move past one’s nest without risking their safety when the moon swells in the sky.” I press a finger to the siren’s lips. “She looks like she’s dreaming. Maybe she remembers what she lost from her life as a human.”

“Maybe,” Morgen says and takes the book, shutting it and placing it back in its spot. She leaves her arm extended over my shoulder, bracing against the shelf. “What are we doing here, Snow? You know I have to go.”

Hurt flickers in her eyes. Hurt and something else, something deeper that I catch a glimpse of every so often when she looks at me.

“I know you do. I won’t try to keep you after the ball tomorrow. I’ll talk to my mother and insist that she repays you so you can leave,” I snip. I know she’s not abandoning me, but I can’t keep the hurt from my voice.

She lifts her gloved hand to my neck, tracing a sharp claw over the curve of my cheek. “I don’t want to leave you.”

So don’t, I want to shout. But I can’t be that selfish.

“Even if you have to leave, it’ll be temporary. I’ll never give up on your curse.”

“We’re out of time, love.”

“No. If I can’t break the spell by the time your birthday rolls around, then I’ll keep searching for a way to free you. One day I’ll slither down to the sea and call you back to me.”

“I don’t think it works like that,” she breathes against my mouth. I open up, trying to drink her in. “I don’t think you’ll like me when I’m like this.” Her nail scrapes the line of my jaw, and I let out a low moan.

“I’ll like you however you are. You were not made to serve Cosette in the sea. You were made for *me*.” She shoves me back against the bookcase with her body. “I will look at the full moon as I always do, knowing you

are bathing in her light. The moon, she always comes back. And I'll come back for you."

She takes my mouth, holding me near my throat with her clawed hand as the other one wanders beneath my gown. She circles two fingers around my clit, moving slowly as I squirm and knock several books to the ground. I lean my head back on the mahogany shelf, gripping the ledge as she works her fingers into me, coaxing more wetness from my slit.

"Fuck, I'm so happy we met." Her eyes are heavy-lidded and her mouth is rosy from kissing me. I want to remember her like this forever. The strength and power she exudes as she takes me against the shelves. The way her beauty hides in her sharp features and makes itself apparent in the way she moves and speaks. Every time I look at her, I'm struck by her unique allure.

"Me too," I say, coming in quick spurts around her fingers. I don't pull away. I push against her, walking her to a reading nook set beneath an arched window. She leans back against the mullion, and I move down her body, sinking to my knees in the middle of the library.

I fist her skirts up, teasing her clit and her entrance, feeling her entire cunt with my hand before following up with my tongue. I lick over her scaled thighs, and her folds, then I trace her clit with my lips, going over her lightly until I feel her bud swell and harden.

I chase her pleasure, following the sighs and moans she's trying so hard to keep quiet. I want to make her feel good. I suck on her clit, not holding back when her abs flex and she starts to say my name so loud I have the distant thought that the librarian might come in after us.

I don't care right now. Let him find us here.

I feel her clenching, running her fingers through my hair as she comes, and I drop my tongue down to her slick entrance, moving inside of her to lap it all up as she finishes. I palm her pussy as she slumps back on the cushions, pressing soft little kisses on her thighs as I crawl out from under her skirts.

"Come here," she says, patting the space beside her. "I want to hold you for a while."

Sweat beads on my forehead. I take off the fur cloak and her jacket, setting them down in the nook. Magic bursts inside me.

"Not yet. I feel like I can do this tonight."

“Gwendolyn.” Her blue eyes deepen as the sun sinks. The shadows of the evening are dancing in the room with us.

“Please, let me do this. There’s still some time left. I’m going to find those books on forbidden curses.” I’m already heading down the aisles, starting my search. “I’m not resting until I’ve spent all of my magic trying to fix this.”

MORGEN

S now's eyes grow heavy as she pores over hundreds of weathered pages. Her fingers keep moving, sifting over words to search for anything she might be able to use to break my curse. She hasn't spoken in half an hour, turning all of her attention to deciphering old spells and symbols. Every time she blinks, her eyes stay shut a little longer.

Her head slumps against my shoulder, and I feel the rhythm of her breath slowing. She's asleep with my jacket pulled over her lap, warm and trusting against me.

I shut the leather-bound book I'm reading—*Curses and Dragon Magic*. As I expected, there were no suggestions for breaking a sea witch's soul curse. I toss in the pile with all the rest of the books and comb my fingers through the waves of her brown hair before tracing the heart shape of her face.

There was a section in the book on dragon mates. Cosette said Sirena turned her mate over to hunters at the last moment, betraying a sacred bond. Looking at Snow, I can't imagine doing that to her.

My heart drops low in my chest. Things are getting worse as the clock ticks closer to my birthday. Cosette must be watching, trying to test me. I don't think I'll pass.

Snow is my one-way ticket to the jars.

I can't stay here any longer. There's the matter of the ball, but it will never be a good time to part ways with her. So I do the most cold-hearted thing I can think of without hurting her and slide my fingers beneath the collar of my brown jacket. I lay her down on the cushions with gravel in my throat and kneel beside her.

I could tell her how I feel, knowing she's dreaming, but I can't say the words aloud. I can't confess it to myself.

"You're the only light I've ever known in this world," I whisper instead and push my arms through the jacket. The garment smells like both of us. It's the only thing that will ever be *ours*.

I hate leaving her here. She's only starting to learn her own strength, but her power seems to shrivel and shrink around these royals. "You'll bloom again one day." I know she will. I kiss her forehead and walk out before I can lose my nerve. It's time to toss my heart to the tide; I can't hand it to Gwendolyn on a silver platter even if it's what I'd like to do. Fuck the money and my legacy. If I wait until after the ball tomorrow, it'll be too late.

It's a shame. The crew worked so hard and traveled so far, and I have nothing to pay them with. I'm fucking them over, leaving a pretty bag of gold behind because I'm afraid of what I might do.

The guards stop me out in the hall. A tall woman with auburn highlights in her blonde hair peers into the library when I emerge. "Where is she?" she asks.

"Sleeping. Please don't wake her yet."

The guard narrows her eyes at me and goes into the library to check on Snow herself. I like that she's mistrusting. It makes me feel a little better as I force myself to leave. I'll try to make this break as clean as possible.

Outside, vines of winter roses creep up the walls of the closest tower, and hedges of holly circle the courtyard in a prickly maze. The air is perfumed with sharp, floral scents, but a salty breeze blows by, calling me to the sea.

"I'm on my way," I whisper to the wind.

Up ahead, a group of guards is filing out of the castle, probably freezing in their blue tunics with only those pitiful red turtlenecks beneath them. I keep my head low and my hands hidden in my pockets as I walk past. I don't need any trouble from them.

"Where are you going?" a woman's voice calls.

"Your majesty." I sweep into a half-assed curtsy when I recognize the queen's voice. "I was just taking a walk around your gardens," I improvise.

The guards part the way to let the queen move through. Her greying hair flows over her shoulders. With the softer hairdo and the flattering

dimness of night, I can actually see the similarities between her and Gwen.

“A walk? You seem to be in quite a hurry. My guards said you looked like you were up to no good out here.” Fine lines scrunch around the bridge of her nose as she squints. Her eyes are a deep, emerald green. They hold no warmth when they rest on me. “I know your type, dear. No matter how much you desire my daughter, you’ll never be worthy of her, and you know it.”

The cold words shatter through me like shards of ice. The queen snaps her fingers, and a guard places a bag in her hand. She immediately throws it on the ground. It lands heavily with metal clinking around inside.

“What’s this?”

“Pick it up,” she orders. “It’s the price of keeping you away from my castle.”

I’m burning with shame as I stoop to pick the bag of gold off the ground, but I do it anyways, weighing its heft in my hand. I’m a pirate, and I came here for the money. I can’t pretend to be above a bribe.

“Do you accept my offer?”

“Yes,” I murmur, hating myself for it.

“Then take your coin and leave. You’re not to send word to Gwendolyn or step foot near my palace again.” She tugs at her hair. “I might still be able to find a suitable match for my daughter after she claimed a damned pirate as her matey.”

I’d laugh, but I fear my ribs might crack as I stalk back to the cave beneath the waxing gibbous moon. In everyone else’s eyes, all I’ll ever be is the grimy pirate who traded her matey for a price. I’d be disgusted too. I gaze at the white light dancing on the black ocean water, hoping this memory won’t be the one that Gwen holds onto. I hope she remembers the sweet nights we shared curled up in each other’s arms and knows the truth of the things I could never tell her.

I shiver, relieved to find there’s a fire roaring near the mouth of the cave. I want to collapse in its warm haze and go to sleep.

“You two look quite cozy,” I say, startling Griff and Sampson. They’re snuggled together on the ground. Sampson presses up on a forearm. Sand clings to his hair.

“Back already?”

“Hmm.” I give one quick nod.

"How's Snow?" Griff asks.

"Don't know. I left when she was asleep."

"You really did that?" Sampson asks. "She'll be devastated."

As if I don't already fucking know that. I sit on the damp sandy floor of the cave. There's a full bottle of liquor near Sampson's bag. I snatch it up and knock several gulps back, welcoming the burn in my throat.

"Hey!" Griff reaches out to me. "That's ours."

I raise a finger and chug more of the rum down. "It's mine now. You're not supposed to be drinking on the lookout."

"How did the queen react? Was she excited to see Snow alive? Did everyone cry?" Sampson and Griff's voices blur together in a string of questions. I don't know who's asking me what. "Will Snow be happy there?"

"How should I know?" I hold the bottle to my chest. "And why do you expect me to care?" I'm cruel enough to steal souls for my mistress, I assure myself. I pull out the bag of gold. It weighs more than I was expecting for a reward. "Here, take this back to the ship."

"It's the middle of the night," Sampson protests.

"Yes, but I want you out of my sight now."

Griff grabs a lantern, shaking out his flop of golden hair. "We can't possibly set out at this time."

"Then get a room at a fucking inn. Buy a new fucking rowboat at the city port. There's plenty of money for it. You can set out in the morning. Don't come back to this place."

"You're not considering staying here alone, are you?" Griff asks, reaching for the bag, but his knuckles brush my hand, and he recoils. "Captain?"

I look down. My black claws are digging into the burlap. I don't want to be remembered like this. "Just take the reward and see that Skye gets it. They'll give everyone a fair cut."

"Something's wrong," Sampson says. "Let us help you."

"No," I snarl, curling my clawed fingers. The glove rips, revealing the scaly skin beneath. "Leave, or you'll both be in danger!"

The lovers glance at each other, and Griff tucks the bag under his vest before taking Sampson's hand. They leave with my bag of gold. The crew will be taken care of. I need *The Ruined Soul* to live on. The ship my father sold my soul for needs to be worth something.

A tear leaks from the corner of my eye. I drink more rum, waiting for my heart to stop feeling like it's oozing hot oil. I want to become a cold, vicious creature of the sea and freeze this useless organ in my chest.

I stagger out to the beach and shout to the sea.

“I’m here to toss my heart to the tide. Come and get it, you ancient fucking hag!”

GWEN

The maids bustle into the room, pushing carts piled high with covered dishes and a serving set for tea. I manage to breathe through the rattling noise, just as I did last night when the cold crept into the library, and I woke to no one beside me beneath the frosted window. My world is tilting on its axis. I've lost Morgen to Cosette. She's gone, and I must keep breathing.

"Thank you," I tell the elderly maid as she reaches for the teapot. "But I can serve myself."

"Oh. No, madam," she says, pouring the piping hot liquid. "It's our job to serve you."

I clasp my hands and press them to my stomach to quell the urge to make the water dance. My loneliness has been contained in a tight fist for my whole life, but now it splays its fingers wide, unleashing a melancholy that climbs up my throat and taps behind my eyes, threatening to start a flood of tears. I won't cry in front of these strangers. I can't have my release until they leave.

"I'd really prefer to break my fast alone."

"It's customary for us to serve the royals as they take their meals." The maid wipes her brow with her beige sleeve and stands with the rest of the women accompanying her. They all stand near the carts with their hands resting on their smocked aprons.

"Good thing I'm not a royal."

"We were instructed to supervise your meal."

Not even a titter of amusement from this crowd, then. It's just as well. I'm not in the mood to put on a smile. I rise from the edge of the bed and

sit in the chair they've pulled out for me.

Uncovering one of the dishes, I find several strips of meat laid out. I lift another cover and find bowls of scrambled eggs, then some sort of savory pie. It all looks too salty, but I don't want to complain. I take a forkful of the pie.

It's definitely going to sit in my stomach all day, heavy as it is.

"Is it not to your liking?" One of the maids watches as I chew slowly through another bite. The task of eating through my heartbreak is even harder with all of them staring.

"No. I like it just fine." I force myself to swallow and sip some tea. My magic slips its tendrils into the steam, and I call it back. *Not yet.* "What are your names?"

They look down at their feet.

The lead maid answers quietly, "The staff isn't allowed to engage in personal conversations with the royals."

"I see." I stab my fork into some eggs and push them around the plate. "You're only here to watch me eat. How pleasant."

"Yes, and when you've finished eating, we'll oversee your bath."

"My bath?" I scrunch the bodice of my gown. I'm aware of how dingy it is. Everything in this room is crisp and clean and smells like lilies. I don't want to peel my comfortable dress from my body and replace it with something so heavily scented. My head is already aching, and my heart is thudding in my ears. I'm afraid of what might happen if they put me in the tub.

"You certainly can't show up to the ball looking like that."

Goddess. The ball. I set my fork down. Perhaps I can get out of this.

"I'm sorry. I feel a headache coming on. I think I'd like to lie down for a while."

The maid clicks her tongue. "Shall I fetch the healer? I'll call for the hot water to be mixed with eucalyptus oil. We'll massage your arms and shoulders and have you propped up and ready to dance tonight."

I'm bombarded with a dozen suggestions on how to chase a headache away. They're not going to leave me alone.

Just keep breathing.

"That would be lovely," I say. Things will be easier if I do as I'm told. They can all pretend I'm their little doll, but I'll be running to the library

as soon as dress-up time is over, devoting myself to learning the limits of my magic. Someday I'll break Morgen's curse and call her back to me.

Wait for me, please.

I sink into my bath with six pairs of eyes on me. I hold my magic back, letting it snowball deep within my chest. It builds so much quicker now that I've had the chance to experiment on the ship. One taste of freedom, and now it craves it all the time. I can relate.

I run my fingers along the edge of the porcelain tub, wishing it was a bucket made of bloated wood. I miss *The Ruined Soul* and my daily routine. I miss the crew and my magic. Most of all I miss her. My pining for Morgen needles beneath my hot skin. How will I ever get past this feeling? The only way is to bring her back.

"Gwendolyn," one of the nameless maids calls to me. "You shouldn't soak for too long. You'll get all pruney, and the queen will be upset."

"Right." I take the towel the woman hands me and dry myself down. My yellow gown gets pinched away. Losing it feels almost as bad as giving up my snow whites, but still, I let them dress me in a ball gown without any complaints.

It's a frothy thing with a royal blue corset tied over a crimson drop-sleeved gown that spills out to a flowy tulle skirt. Gold ribbons lace up the back, tying in all of Gentrilly's colors. One maid powders my face and paints my lips a deep red to match my gown. Another maid combs through my hair, spritzing something to try to work through the tangles.

"Not sure what we can do with this mess," she grumbles around the pins she's holding between her teeth.

"I'd like to do her hair myself." The comb snags on a snarl when I look up at the queen. Everyone goes silent, bending at the knee to show respect for her as she comes through the doorway.

"Rise," she says. "I only wish to make up for lost time with my daughter." She smiles and touches the gold-laced collar of her blue jacket and waves a hand over her scarlet taffeta skirt. "I made sure we would match for the ball tonight. The three of us will look like a family."

I wait for my heart to flutter at the prospect of having a family. It doesn't happen. I think the part of me that always hoped for even a crumb of affection in her letters is broken. I can't forget how Jacques looked in the nightmare realm, lost and ruined after pledging his life to the queen.

"Thank you. The gown is beautiful."

“And so are you, dear Gwendolyn. Come, walk with me to my chambers. I have a gift for you.”

My damp hair cools against my neck, but trying to keep up with the queen in my high-heeled slippers staves off the chill. The guards escort us to the other side of the palace, moving too fast for me to get more than a glimpse into the open salons.

“It’s just ahead,” she says when I start to lose my breath. She gestures to the double doors of her chambers. “Go in, I’ll be there in a moment.”

I walk in, shielding my eyes to block the sunlight coming in through the three gold-paned windows. It’s much too harsh right now. I crave a dark, quiet space in the library where I can lose myself in an old tome of magic.

I don’t want to sit on my mother’s bed, so I pull out the chair at her sterling silver vanity. My reflection does look lovely, but contorting my face in front of strangers sounds unpleasant. I practice a forced smile, trying to remember which muscles to use to make it look natural.

A black spot flickers in the mirror, and my red pout drops. Someone is watching me. I’m not safe here.

I search around the room. The quilt is too thick and heavy to lift, but there’s a tapestry hanging on the wall. I tear it down, ripping a dragon’s wing as it broils a city in a gory scene. Huffing, I throw it over the mirror.

“What’s this?” My mother slams the door shut after dismissing her guards.

“The mirror.” I run my hand over the silver surface of the vanity. “Grimhilde can see us.”

“Sit down, Gwendolyn,” she orders and pulls the tapestry off. My pulse throbs in my temple as I take a seat. She grabs a brush from her dresser and starts working on my hair. “I like that she can see us. I often hope she’ll check in on me.” She gathers my hair at the nape of my neck, tugging my head back. “Tell me the truth of what happened with her.”

“It’s just as the stories said.” My throat tightens with the lie. “A lover’s spat, but I survived and found my way to you.”

She hums as she twirls a strand of hair around her fingers, forming a spiral curl that she pins back. I used to love long hair grooming sessions with the other servant blues, but I don’t know my mother. Her touch is unfamiliar. It makes me uncomfortable.

“I suppose you’re entitled to your secrets,” she says. She doesn’t believe me. I shift in my seat. I don’t want to cause another war. I simply want to survive and help Morgen. “I have a few of my own. Did you ever hear rumors about me?”

My blush gives me away. “I heard you loved Grimhilde before you married the king.”

“That’s common knowledge. Everyone knows we had a falling out when she left my court to join that cult. She wasn’t satisfied with standing by my side. She wanted to hold her own power. I was mad with grief over her for a very long time.” She cuts a cruel smile in her reflection. “But I’m not speaking of Grimhilde. How much do you know about my dealings with the fae realm?”

I shake my head. I know the key facts—that King Morrow and Monarch Darien fought, and the fae portal was sealed off. My memory of my mother’s involvement in that conflict is murky at best. I’m a pitiful student of anything that doesn’t hold my interest.

She smooths her forehead with her thumb and index finger. “I supported Monarch Darien until the violence from their realm started spilling into our world. The royal coffers were dwindling from my own war, and I was growing bored of the fighting.” *Bored?* I saw how good people lost their homes and families because of her war, and she was bored? I try not to let my disgust show on my face. “I couldn’t afford any more bloodshed, so when Darien proposed a solution, I took it.” She leans onto the chair behind me, watching both of our reflections in the mirror. “This is so nice, being able to talk to you.”

“I agree.” I pull a fake smile for her. There’s so much information being thrown at me, and I don’t know how to piece it all together. “I’m so pleased.”

“I knew our plan would work the day you were born. We’d made the child who could unite both realms someday. Not every fae-blooded babe holds power, but yours was exceptional.” My mouth wobbles trying not to let my smile drop as her cold fingers sweep baby hairs off the back of my neck. “I died giving birth to you, and when they laid you on my chest, you brought me back to life. I knew how special you were from the moment I met you, a wailing babe wrapped in her own blue glow.”

Soft blue tendrils of light stream through my fingers, reacting to some memory ingrained into my soul. They spiral up when she continues, “I

knew word would get out about you. I had every midwife, maid, and visitor killed. I took the tongues from the able-bodied knights who were unfortunate enough to witness your gifts. I couldn't risk someone harming you out of fear."

She spilled all that blood for me. Jacques was there that day. She ruined his life, and he died keeping her secret. *My* secret. I try to hide the snapping ribbons of magic in my skirt, but she looks down at my lap.

"There's no need to hide that from me. I know what you are."

"What am I?" I ask her, wanting to hear her confirm it aloud. She leans forward, letting her silver locket drape past my shoulder.

"Go ahead. Open it." One of the ovals holds a portrait of Grimhilde's bust, painted in her youth with her auburn hair flowing over the green bodice of her gown. The portrait in the opposite frame shows a miniature painting of a gorgeous fae being with long, black waves of hair falling on broad shoulders. Golden brown eyes stare back at me, a mirror image of my own.

"You're my half-fae daughter. Someday you'll inherit my lands and the lands of the Kraken fae."

"What about my sister?"

"Don't worry about her," she says. I grip my seat, feeling queasy. "Monarch Darien, Grimhilde, and I all agreed that you'd bypass King Morrow and unlock the portal when the time was right. You were born to be great."

"Grimhilde knew?"

Black spots dance in the mirror. If she's watching, then she must see the changes in me that my mother cannot. She used to know me better than anyone, but I'm not Gwendolyn of the servant blues anymore. She has lost me as I've lost her.

"We wrote the terms of the peace treaty together when we reconciled. She was supposed to guard your secret and help your magic grow so that you could use it when the ocean called to you."

The whispering of the tide has followed me since Jacques' death. It's as if my ears are pressed to seashells, and I can hear the faintest ghost of ocean waves beneath every conversation. It roars around me now. So much plotting, planning, and scheming, and what was it all for?

"Then why did she want me dead?" The question falls from my mouth, betraying my efforts to stay silent. I've never been any good at hiding the

truth. “Why did she pretend to love me?”

“I’m sure she loved you as she loved me.” My mother curls back another piece of hair and pins it in place. “I knew she would want to make you into her likeness. You only needed to be malleable for her. Did you do something to break her trust?”

The half-up, half-down hairdo and a smudge of kohl eyeliner make my worried eyes look huge in the mirror. Grimhilde might be watching, and she knows the truth. The rules I’ve broken and what I’m capable of. Magic that could destroy a kingdom.

The kind of magic that heals and shines light where it’s needed most. My magic forms a vapor and traces my fingers the same way Morgen did.

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” I tell her. She doesn’t look convinced.

“Maybe not, but I can see that Grimhilde kept you silly. You’re not up to the task of combining the realms just yet.” She reaches for a cherrywood box on her dresser and opens it. A golden comb lies on the blue velvet lining. Dark red rubies shimmer on the flower-shaped shaft. “And besides, she broke the pact when she tried to kill you. Such an insult will not go unpunished. I won’t let her reap the benefits of our agreement.”

She takes the comb and sticks it into my hair forcefully. I cry out when the sharp teeth bite into my scalp, cutting the skin that’s already sore from all the brushing and teasing.

“You’ll unlock the portal and drink from one of the faery rivers to make yourself immortal. Claim your power and your vengeance.”

“I don’t want to.” Black clouds gather in my peripheral vision. My speech is slurred, and my head feels funny, but I’m so tired of existing as a piece in someone’s game. “I won’t.”

“Oh, but you will.” She fluffs my hair and presses her cheek to mine. “In a hundred years, you’ll wake up, venerated and beloved by all because I made you into a legend. Grimhilde’s name will turn to dust, and I will get the last laugh because my family’s name will live on with the faeries.”

I claw at my hair, trying to rip the comb out as a burning sensation spreads over my scalp. These two and their feud—it’s all-consuming. They don’t care if they destroy the world between them. They don’t care if they destroy *me*. I have to get away from here. My mother grabs my hands and pulls them down. Panic locks tight around my throat. I struggle, but the queen is strong, and I’m too woozy to fight her.

“Monarch Darien will be waiting for you. They’ll help you finish out our plan.”

“No!’ I scream, “I can’t leave Morgen for a hundred years!”

“Shh.” She pats my cheek, and shadows fall over my surroundings. Her voice sputters and slows as she tries to console me with promises of greatness. “No one will remember this nonsense with the pirate. She’ll be long forgotten by then.”

I’ll have to sleep for a hundred years without her by my side. It’s the last coherent thought I have before the world fades to black.

MORGEN

I wake to the relentless sound of bells. I swipe at the acrid-tasting drool around my mouth and spit sand on the cold floor of the cave. Groaning, I turn over and try to fall asleep again.

Pain shoots down my left leg. I pull up my skirt to examine it. The flesh is covered with scales, and pale green webbing runs between my toes. I flex my right foot. There's only a thin layer beginning to form, but soon my legs will meld together. My feet will become my fins.

I rest my throbbing head on top of my stacked forearms. I'm not nearly drunk enough for this.

There's another bottle of rum left in the bag. I crawl to it, hoping it will get me through until midnight when the last grain of sand drops in the hourglass.

"Shut the fuck up," I mutter at the bells. It's hard to revel in the joy of bells ringing to announce Gwendolyn's return when I can't be there to celebrate with her. I freeze with my mouth around the glass rim. Each note comes far too slowly after the last to be considered ringing.

Why the fuck are the bells tolling such a somber tune?

Dread creeps into the cave with me.

I close my eyes. It's all in my head. I delivered Snow to her mother. She's safe. I got the gold and handed it to the crew. Everything is set. My work is done.

But the bells don't stop, and my anxiety doesn't subside. I brace a hand on the cave wall as I try to stand. I end up doubling over to vomit.

That's better.

I take a full breath of salt air, wincing as I cross the sea glass beach. Each step is agony on what remains of my left foot. I want to lie in the thin layer of seafoam and wait for the tide to take me away, but there's a mist of uncertainty rolling over the waves. I can't finish my transformation without checking in one last time.

I only need reassurance that Snow is ok. I won't even try to steal a glimpse of her dressed for the ball. Grey clouds move in from the west, blowing gusts of wind that foretell a snowfall. The bitter cold bites at my face and clears the fog from my ale-addled brain. My sweat-dampened skirts dry in stiff sheets around my legs as I limp into the city. I'm sure I look frightful, but I won't get close enough to the castle for my appearance to matter.

A group of beggar women congregates behind a church of the old gods. The stained glass windows are mostly blacked out, with silver pieces wedged in to form the fae face of the god of night. He glowers over the dark, unpaved street. The rose quartz glamour of the palace doesn't extend to this part of the city, where the land touches the unpatrolled portion of the Venerated Sea.

"Pardon me," I say to the women huddled together in the cold. They're young and hungry. Their gaunt faces make them look years older than they must be. One of the women pulls her dirty red shawl tight over her breast to shield a babe from the cold. Or from me. They all eye my ruined attire with concern.

"What d'ya want?" the woman with the babe asks. The bell tolls, sending another wave of apprehension through me.

"Has the castle made an announcement? Are the bells going to continue all day before the ball even begins?"

"Not sure how you missed all the ruckus. The bloody officials from the castle have been disrupting the peace for hours with the noise." The woman who answers sticks her tongue through a gap where her two front teeth should be and sniffs the air. I'm sure she can tell I've spent the morning passed out; I can smell the liquor on myself. "There's no more ball to be had. Turns out the poor little wretch turned up for her own mourning ceremony yesterday, only to be killed early this morning."

My heart doesn't just skip a beat. It stops completely. I can't breathe. I can't make sense of the words, but I absorb them all the same.

“Don’t be so dramatic.” The woman shifts the baby on her hip. “She’s not dead, only poisoned with a sleeping curse.”

I press my shoulder to the church’s stone wall, seeking relief. For my heart. For my leg. There’s none to be found. Nothing can soothe the ache of hearing these strangers discuss Gwen’s body.

“She might as well be dead. Put to sleep for a hundred years? Who knows what’ll happen to her body in the meantime,” one of the beggars muses.

“They’ll pamper her. It’ll still be a better life than any of us will ever know,” another one laughs.

“Wren. That’s unfair. That Moon Coven witch took her from her cradle and refused to let her go.” She kisses her baby’s head. “I think it’s sad.”

“What does Grimhilde have to do with this?” I ask.

“Word has it she’s the one who sent the poison.” The raven-haired woman called Wren sounds merry. “Must’ve paid one of the maids off. I’m sure we’ll all be attending a hanging soon.” She puffs out her cheeks and laughs at my scowl. “Don’t act so glum about it. I’m sure you weren’t getting an invite to the ball anyways. At least they’re passing out bread in honor of the queen’s would-be heir. You’ve got to get in line and pay your respects though. They’re keeping her in a glass coffin for everyone to see.”

“Where?”

Wren points at the castle. “In the royal gardens. It’s a long wait but worth it.”

I press the last of my coins into her palm. I don’t need them where I’m going.

Where am I going?

To the sea to serve Cosette, but first I’m going to the castle. I have to see her and torture myself with one last look because I had a choice—the scales or the jars, and I took the easiest path to the option I thought best.

But there was never going to be an easy way out. Cosette would never allow me to become one of her sirens without ripping my heart from my chest in the most brutal way possible. I made my choice, and now I get to feel every crack in the armor I used to guard myself with. Pain shoots up to my hip, but I limp forward, trying to get to the queue before I collapse.

The tolling of the bells follows me to the rose quartz path, mocking my belief that I could choose the life of a siren and still see Gwen to safety. The clapper hits the sound bow again and again, and the reverberations

smack against the inside of my skull in time with my own self-flagellating chant.

DONG. DING. DONG. YOU. CHOSE. WRONG.

I close my eyes and steady myself for a moment, trying to get my thoughts together, trying to spin the situation to fit my own needs as I have always done. But how can I twist my desire to see her into anything meaningful? There is only crushing defeat and a world that is too dark without her light.

I touch the dagger in my waistband. *Vengeance*. I am going to claim vengeance and take my fury out on those who didn't protect her. I can say my goodbyes to Snow and still be vicious enough to drag my ass back down to the tide before the clock strikes midnight.

Steeling my resolve, I file into the line that wraps out beyond the castle gates. I'm herded into the crowd with noblewomen ahead of me pinching their noses in disgust, and old men behind me wearing jackets that are too thin to provide real warmth against the snow flurries landing on their shoulders.

I'm almost to the royal gardens when a horn is blown from the balcony overlooking the fountain, and a messenger's voice booms over the crowd.

"Visiting hours for the would-be princess will end at sundown," he cries. Grumbling protests ripple through the crowd. I'm shoved forward by a man shouldering his way up the line. He barely has any meat on his bones, so I don't bother pushing back. I pull my hat down low as two guards move in with their swords drawn to break up the fight starting several yards ahead of me. "We will open the gates again at dawn."

"But I've been waiting for hours," the old man behind me moans. I usher him and his companion ahead of me. I'm fine with biding my time until they start shooing people away and closing the gates. I want to be alone with Snow and the ones who are supposed to keep her safe. I tighten my claws into a fist, letting the sharp nails dig into my palms. They'll get what's coming for them, and I'll leave for the sea with nothing but the satisfaction of inflicting pain.

It won't bring her back, my heart whispers. *You're the one who left her here alone.*

I'm even more responsible for this than the queen or any of the guards. They should've had her food tested for poison, but I should've thought of a better solution than leaving Gwen in this castle.

I touch the pendant beneath my bodice, feeling its pressure against my sternum. There was always another solution, but admitting it could work would mean conceding defeat to Cosette. I press it into my breastbone until it hurts. Would I have done things differently if I'd known this would happen to her?

I don't let myself answer the question.

Just keep pushing forward. There are only a few hours left to wreck this place and get my anger out before I must return to the sea.

Another fight breaks out when I reach the outer edge of the hedge maze encircling the courtyard. I use the distraction to slip between the shrubbery. My absence is quickly swallowed by hungry citizens eager to receive their meager offering of bread. I drop to the mulch and out of sight, dragging my left leg behind me as I belly crawl into the bushes, ignoring the holly leaves that snag on my skin and hair. I can hide here until the crowd clears and the guards stand at ease.

The sun is dropping low, casting orange flares through dark clouds. The guards are pushing people away from a sparkling object. It hurts to look at it, but I force my watering eyes open against the harsh rays setting on the glass coffin.

She's in there, her profile on display through the clear walls. She holds a bouquet of the deepest crimson roses. Corstylian roses. They're the most beautiful blooms, but they're not meant to thrive here. She's not meant to be here with her small feet sticking up from beneath a heavy gown. Her fingers should be stained with herbs and animated, not unmoving and clasped around purposeless flowers. Her mouth should be powdered with sugar crystals and speaking excitedly, not painted scarlet and fixed in eternal repose.

She should be dancing beneath the moon in a secret cottage in Corstyliia where she would have been safe from anyone trying to hurt her. She could have had a garden there and the space to practice her magic.

I grasp the pendant. The lost opportunity hurts more than the scales splitting through my limbs. Night drops fast with the approaching snow shower. As soon as the color bleeds from the day and the crowd is shoved out of the garden, I grip the handles of my blades, drawing in one breath for courage. I want to cause as much pain as I feel.

Only two guards are standing before the coffin, but they're both wearing full suits of armor. I study their movements as they take turns

wiping the wet snow from the glass lid. I'll have to go for the gaps at their necks and elbows.

There's a wide terrace behind the coffin, but two thrones sit abandoned between the ivory pillars. The seats are empty. The queen and the princess didn't see the visitation hours to the end. The snub fans the flames inside me. If I cause enough commotion, maybe I can get them to come out so I can scare the royal shit out of them.

Drawing out my daggers, I speed toward the guards. They startle.

"Fuck." The closest one scrambles for his sword, but I'm moving too fast, cutting into the crease of his armored sleeve. He yells, but I keep jabbing at an uncovered spot on his arm. Bloodlust takes my vision for anything but violence. I forget my plans to go back to the sea. Perhaps the transformation of my heart is complete; there's nothing I want to do more than claim a soul from this pathetic excuse of a guard.

I pivot at the sound of heavily-armored footsteps, prepared to take on the other guard. I have a blade in each hand, after all.

"Stop!" I hear a woman issuing the command, but I can't stop. "Stop or the queen will hear us, and I won't be able to help you."

I keep my blades raised, looking into the blue eyes beneath the visor of the guard's helmet, but I pause, waiting for him to attack.

"If they back down, will you let me speak?" Princess Briallen asks. Her heels click on the pavers of the terrace as she closes the double doors behind her. Her black gown blows in the wind, catching beneath the flare of her ribs.

"That depends," I pant, "on whether or not you can give me a good reason for how you let her get into such a state. Is it not customary to have food and drink tested before offering it to a princess?"

She arches a perfect eyebrow. "It didn't seem necessary as she's not a true princess."

I let out a ferocious, inhuman noise, and I'm wrenched back by one of the guards. I will kill them all for this. I twist my wrist free and aim my dagger near the slit in the guard's visor.

"Unhand her, Robert," Princess Briallen orders. The guard growls but releases my arm. I'm still raging, looking around for a fight. The guards should be trying to hack my head off right about now, but they stand still, awaiting the princess' orders as she approaches me.

Brialen is considerably taller than Snow, and they don't look anything alike, but something in the way she tilts her head reminds me of her. The familiarity of the gesture kills my defiance.

"I waited all day to see if you'd come back," she says.

"Why? So you can have me thrown into the dungeon to age slowly while she lies there on display for years?" Her plan won't work. If I could scream about my curse, I would throw it in her face. She hugs herself against the cold, tapping her manicured fingernails along her upper arms.

"No, I wanted to see if my suspicions were correct. You've just confirmed that they are." She looks to her guards and stretches a finger toward the doors to the palace. "Leave us."

They hesitate but obey her command, glancing over their shoulders as they stalk back to the palace.

"Make it quick, Princess. I only came here for one thing."

"What's that?"

I start to form the word *vengeance*, but my bottom lip catches between my teeth. "To say goodbye."

"I was right," she says, her pale pink mouth puckering into a tight smile. "There was a reason the queen sent you away." I already feel the full weight of my mistakes. No one can make me feel worse than I do now, not even this ice princess whose movements are a faint, stiff echo of Snow's.

"If you wish to insult me, you're wasting your time."

"No insult intended," she responds, her eyes drifting to her sister. "I only wish to see that my mother's most recent effort to start a war is undone before it causes any real damage to the realm."

The admission chills me to my core. Ice water thickens my veins.

"She did this to her? How?" I want to take my dagger and bury it into the queen's useless heart when I think of Snow and how she only wanted someone to love her. "Why?"

"According to my spies, she purchased a relic of nightmare magic from the Queen of Sarteal." She tips her head to the side in a half-shrug. "I suppose she wants to start another fight with the High Priestess. Sending her such an atrocious curse would certainly justify a call to arms."

"Why are you telling me this?" I ask her.

"Because I want to help my sister."

"That's bullshit."

She flinches at the foul language but licks her tongue over her teeth and laughs.

“You’ve got me there. Consider this—I’ve worked my whole life trying to live up to a role I wasn’t born for. Everyone remembers the would-be princess when they see me. I’ve poured my entire soul into studying history and diplomacy, vowing to repair the destruction of my mother’s war. Then my sister reappears in some miraculous turn of events, only to be placed under a magical slumber.” She steps close to me, the muscles beside her nose twitching in sheer annoyance. “When she awakens, it’ll be another miracle. Her sanctity will go unquestioned. No one will remember my legacy, no matter how hard I try to reset the world after my mother’s interference.”

I straighten, posturing so that she feels every inch of height I have on her. I understand how it feels to build a name for yourself with the hope it will live on after you’re gone. I’ve spent my whole life doing the very same thing. But what does any legacy matter if Snow will wake up in a hundred years thinking I left her to deal with this on her own?

“I don’t give a shit about your legacy.” The princess backs up. “And I don’t understand what I have to do with solving *your* problem.”

“It’s a slumber caused by nightmare poison. You’ve never heard the tales of how such a curse is remedied?”

Every child reads the old fairytales of Aeron. Even ones who spend much of their adolescence on a pirate ship. *Only true love’s kiss can awaken a poor soul lost to the effects of nightmare poison.* It’s a lovely line, one I used to believe in the same way I believed in frog princes and pumpkins that could transform into carriages.

“Those are only fairytales,” I say, my mouth going dry. “I’ve never heard of anyone waking up from a sleeping curse before the hundred years is up.” I don’t mention the fact that most die because their bodies are usually left unprotected once their loved ones are gone.

“True love is quite rare, indeed,” she replies, looking more triumphant as my face falls. “But I saw the way you looked at Gwendolyn when you both stood before us, and I thought maybe my mother had a good reason to keep you away. She likes to deter people from meddling in her affairs.”

I always wondered what a test of the heart would look like if I was foolish enough to let myself fall in love. I imagined Cosette would send horrible beasts after us, or plunge us into a deep hole where only one of us

could make it out alive. But in the end, there are no beasts to run my sword through, no valiant feats of strength to prove where my heart lies.

There's only the woman I love lying in a glass coffin, and the choice is suddenly clear.

"I'd like to have a few moments alone with her," I tell Princess Briallen.

"Very well, then. But don't take too long. You must get her out of here before Queen Isobel comes around." Her gown trails in the dusted layer of snow as she walks away, only stopping to call back to me, "And I'm sure you know that no one is to find out about this, or I'll hunt you both down myself."

I don't respond. I wait until she's gone, and then I whisper an apology to my father. "I'm sorry, Ronan. You did your best, but this choice is mine."

My breath fogs the glass as I send the coffin's lid creaking on its hinges. I suck in a breath. I know Gwen's not dead, but she *looks* like she is. Her breathing is so faint, it's hardly noticeable. There's no movement in her body. She's sensitive to the cold, but even in this gown made for dancing in a heated palace, her skin is smooth and unpebbled. I drape my brown jacket over her. The cold doesn't bother me anymore.

"I'm here," I say, leaning over the edge to stroke my hand over her forehead. I accidentally knock her jeweled comb out of place, mussing her hair. My stomach sinks like a stone when I see the dark drops of dried blood on her scalp. Studying the accessory closely, I rub my thumb over the bulbs of poison on the sharp golden teeth. "I'm so sorry I let you get hurt. I never should've left you here with these vipers. They were all too ready to strike when you stepped into their nest. You've never deserved any of the venom life has given you."

Snow falls quietly all around us. Flurries land on her face only to be melted by the hot tears dripping from my eyes. "I should have told you how I felt before I left. I can't believe I thought I could go to the sea without telling you how much I love you." I press my lips to her forehead, and more tears spring up from a well I thought had dried out long ago. They roll down her face and neck, leaving salty trails. I kiss her eyes and cheeks and stop when my mouth is positioned over hers. "How could I toss my heart to the tide when it's belonged to you since the moment I first saw you dressed in your snow whites?"

I close my mouth over hers, sealing my fate with a kiss. There's a tug against my soul, but I keep my mouth on hers. Excitement courses through my body when I feel her draw in a deep breath. Yes. There's no misery in this choice, only the bliss of knowing that she's waking up and I can still get her to safety if we're quick.

Her eyes flutter open, and she blinks several times. She lifts her hands to my face and pulls me down to her with a wide smile that brightens my whole world.

"You came back," she says and kisses me. There's a yank behind my heart that nearly knocks me off my feet.

"Of course I came back," I answer. "But we need to get you out of here."

GWEN

The bottom of the sea is pitch black. I swim through its never-ending depths, not needing air or anything. I don't know where I'm going or where I came from. It's as if I've been tumbling through the water for all eternity. There is no end or beginning here.

A current pulls me back, beckoning me to swim toward its origin deep within the abyss, but I keep moving away. I only follow the yearning of my heart. I don't know what it is I long for, but I keep searching anyways, swimming aimlessly with the hope that I'll find what's missing.

A glimmer of pale light flashes through the water. I tread in place for a moment, seeing my hands in front of me for the first time. A disk of white light filters through the darkness. I kick my legs, chasing the comforting luminescence. Radiant blue threads form around my fingers, unspooling and tying me to the light source.

Even the voice from below cannot call me back. I am bound to the light, and it's tugging me to the surface.

I blink my eyes open to a world of white. Snow is falling on my eyelashes, and Morgen is leaning over me with tears spilling from her bright blue eyes. The full moon rises behind her head.

She always comes back.

Shoving the heavy bouquet of roses from my chest, I reach up and pull her down to me. I don't know where I am or what's happened, but the sickening fear creeping up my spine doesn't have time to settle in. Morgen is here, and I'm safe when I'm with her.

"You came back," I remark and kiss her, feeling fully alive as our mouths close together. She smells like piss and stale liquor, but the sharp

scent chases the sickly sweet fragrance of roses and lilies from my nostrils.

“Of course I came back,” she answers, touching my cheek. Scales snake up her neck in four strands like the receptacles of a flower, holding her head in place. Her hair has gone almost completely silver. “But we need to get you out of here.”

I sit up and press my palms against the cold glass, remembering what happened. Horror rises through me, making me dizzy as I reach for the tender spot on my scalp. The comb is gone.

“Whoah,” Morgen says as I sway back. “Easy there.” She helps me push my arms through her brown jacket and makes gentle conversation. “I heard rumors about Grimhilde paying a maid to give you a sleeping poison. I had to see you.”

I rise to my knees, bracing myself against her as I jump from this... *Goddess*. They put me in a coffin outside the palace. My slippered feet meet the snowy ground, and I wrap my arms into the notches above her shoulders as she holds me around my waist.

“It wasn’t Grimhilde.” The truth rushes out of me. She needs to know we’re not safe at the castle. “It was my mother. She—”

“It’s ok.” She embraces me tightly, then steps back an arm’s length to give me some space. “Your sister told me what happened.”

“How in the world did you wake me up?”

“The princess knew of a remedy.”

“What should we do now?” I ask her. “We can’t just let the queen get away with this. We have to tell someone.”

“I want to run my sword through everyone responsible for this, but there’s no time.”

Panic cuts through my relief. *The curse*. There can’t be much time left in her hourglass. Judging by the moon, there are probably only a couple hours until her birthday. She turns me toward the gate, keeping one arm around me. “Come on, lean on me one more time. We’ll get you to safety.”

She boosts me over the gates when the guards aren’t looking and drops into the hedge bushes next to me a few moments later.

“Ready?” I ask her.

“Yes.” She keeps her eyes forward, moving at a slow, determined pace. To fill the silence, I tell her what I learned at the palace—about my birth

and the disposal of the witnesses.

“My whole life has been a game for them,” I spit after I tell her about the plot to use me as a key to unlock the fae realm and how my mother cared more about getting retribution for the insult of Grimhilde breaking their pact than my safety. “None of it makes sense to me. Why would the High Priestess play along for all those years and decide to kill me once she found out how great my power could be? Isn’t that what the three of them wanted—to wield me as a weapon? I don’t know how I scared her off.”

Morgen clenches her teeth.

“I get it now,” she says. “She saw you as a path to glory, just as your mother did. But she witnessed your magic and knew it wasn’t meant to be weaponized. No matter how hard she tried to be the one in control, she was always going to end up in the shadows created by your light. Your High Priestess never feared your gifts; she was afraid of how much people would love you for them.”

“That can’t be it. She said she would be the only one who ever loved me—”

“After everything she hid from you, you can’t believe a word she said. The crew loves you. After Harri, they all flocked to you. And Jacques, he was going to accompany you to the castle after what the queen did to him, simply because you’d asked him. You are so loved, and I—” She shoulders forward, leading with her upper body. “I need to focus.”

My fingers dig into her waist, trying to keep her upright. I struggle down the city stairs to the shoreline. My steps are slowed by Morgen’s weight on my right side. The trek feels rougher than it should. The shift in our dynamic must have happened subtly because I’m only now noticing it. But at some point, she started leaning on me for support.

“Morgen, you’re limping.”

She sets her jaw and grunts.

“Let me see where you’re hurt.”

“Not enough time for that,” she says faintly and straightens her posture, dragging me along with her.

“Please, no one is coming after us,” I tell her when we reach the cave. “Show me your wounds.”

“Help me push the rowboat down to the shore,” she says, ignoring my plea.

I'm still weak from the poison, but I crouch and shove the boat over the sea glass with her. We both groan from the effort, stumbling over sections of smooth rocks. Once it's in the water, she fixes the oars in the riggers and stands, sweating through her thin blouse even though it's snowing on the beach and freezing cold water is rushing up around our ankles.

"Is the transformation very painful?"

"Not at all," she murmurs, but I catch her wincing as she takes her seat on the bench.

"I can give you some relief." I take the opposite bench and splash some cold water, letting it light up at my fingertips. "I feel more confident in my magic than ever. I believe we can do anything as long as we stick together. If there was a remedy for the sleeping curse, then there has to be a way to bring a siren back to her human form."

My wet palm glistens the same shade of blue as her eyes. She adjusts the oars for me, avoiding my magic. "We need to get past the choppy tide while I can still help you. *The Ruined Soul* shouldn't be leaving until tomorrow, according to Lilah's plans. You should be able to catch them in time if keep rowing."

"But I'm going to break your curse once we're past this rough spot," I insist. "I can feel it."

The waves splash over the gunnels, rocking us and sending my stomach somersaulting as we struggle to keep the boat set.

I speak to her over the rushing water. I'm frantically trying to keep her with me. I'm even more afraid of her transformation and ending up alone than I am of capsizing and sinking to the bottom of the ocean.

"I'm sorry I've been talking about myself this whole time when you must be terrified of what's happening to you," I shout back to her as another wave rolls beneath us, knocking the oars against my chest.

"I'm not afraid anymore," she answers.

"You're braver than I am." I have to blink through tears. "I don't know how you do it. I'm terrified by the mere prospect of being alone. I didn't last a full day in my mother's palace without you, and I spent the whole time trying to figure out a way to bring you back and you...You're handling this whole thing better than I am."

The blades of her oars dig into the water, hauling us over the crest of a wave. The boat settles on more manageable waters as we clear the rolling

tide.

“Gwen.” She stops rowing. “Look at me.”

Her otherworldly hair shines pale in the moonlight. It’s such a stark contrast from how she looked the first time we met.

“Let me try one more time before you leave me.” I touch her knee, and a smile softens the harsh lines of fatigue around her eyes. “I just want to get back to the ship with you.”

“I want that too, but I’m so fucking tired, Snow. I’m not sure I can make it that far. The afancs should be sleeping, but if one bothers you, don’t hesitate to use the harpoon. And your magic. Don’t underestimate it.”

She reaches beneath her collar and pulls on the cord tied around her neck, lifting it over her head. My heart sinks beneath the cool weight of the pendant she drops into my palm.

“Skye will make sure you get to Corstyliia with enough money in your pockets to get started. When you arrive, take the main path to the seaside cliffs. There’s a lovely tavern just before you get to the forest. Stop and eat before you travel any further; the walk is always longer than it seems. Head north through the woods. The snowberry patch will be in bloom this time of year. Once you’re past it, you’ll find the cottage.”

“The cottage?”

“I think you know the one. I’ve visited a few times myself. It’s still in good shape, thanks to the enchantment. It shouldn’t require much upkeep,” she says and cups her hands around mine.

“But it’s only for King Casimir’s descendants.”

“And the ones they love,” she finishes. The silence spans a heartbeat as the revelation sets in. “You hold the key. You hold my whole heart.”

My lips tingle with a memory, a kiss my body remembers although my mind does not. *True love’s kiss*. That was the remedy to the sleeping curse.

“You woke me up with a kiss, didn’t you?” I choke back a sob when she squeezes my hands. The very thing she always feared—it’s happening. “You failed your test right at the end.”

“No, love. How could I consider it a failure when I know your light will live on?” I slump my head against her chest. She rests her chin on top of my hair. “Now, I can’t stop you from opening some fae portal and claiming your destiny if that’s what you choose, but I can promise you’ll

be safe in the cottage. No one will be able to find you or control you again. Your magic will belong to you, and you'll be free to use it as you wish."

"But what about you?" I cry and furrow my brow, concentrating to make swirls of water circle overhead. I sense the prickly arms of the curse dislodging as pieces of her soul are torn apart. I wrap my magic around her like a shield, trying to keep her spirit intact, but the broken bits of her are too slippery to grasp. I press my hands to her ribs, tuning in to the rise and fall of her breath. If she's giving her heart to me, then I intend to keep it. "I have to fix this."

She grips my wrists, pressing my hands even closer to her body, but she nuzzles my head in the softest gesture, coaxing me to lift my chin. There are tears in her eyes when I meet her gaze.

"There's nothing to fix," she says. "This is the only time I'll ever get to love you. So *please*, Gwendolyn, let me love you."

As a healer, I know the signs of a fading life force, and Morgen's is blinking out quickly. I've seen many deaths. Some are peaceful and met with calm acceptance. Others are violent and fought until the very end. I want the love of my life to have the gentlest experience possible, so I set aside my desire to rage against her fate and paint her the most blissful scene I can imagine instead.

"We're going to have to make this whole *matey* thing official once we get to Corstyliia," I tell her, sniffing and tracing the scales along her neck. I never want to forget the angle of her jawline or the way her mandible joint feels when she relaxes beneath my touch. "Unless you're too much of a rakish pirate to wed your woman."

"You've reformed me of my rakish ways." I move beside her on the bench and guide her head down onto my lap as her eyes close.

"I used to dream of a summer wedding, but I don't want to wait that long. I'll trade a crown of honeysuckle for a bouquet of winter roses."

She cracks an eye open. "I'm going to encourage you to wait so you can have your dream wedding when the forest floor will be lush with wildflowers."

"I'll insist on doing it right away," I sigh. "And you'll relent."

She coughs out a laugh. "I'm looking forward to marrying you and carrying you over the threshold of our very own cottage."

"Where you'll take me to our bed and sleep with me every night?"

"Every night," she agrees. "You'll be so clingy."

“You’ll be so growly,” I retort.

“I’ll love every minute of it.”

“Me too. I love you so much, Morgen.”

Her ribs rise with a shallow breath, and she turns her head against my stomach. I stroke her hair as she draws her last breath and dies in my arms.

GWEN

No. No. No. No. No. This cannot be happening.

Water laps at the hull. It's the only sound besides my desperate keening. A small wave hits the starboard side, and I call the spray up around us in a shield of twinkling lights. My magic has pulled people back from the brink of death before. If I breathe and think, I can bring her back.

Tears roll down my cheeks and hit her face. Nothing happens. I wave my hands over her body, summoning the water and my healing light. The tendrils of energy brush up against nothing. Deep within Morgen's body, there's a blank void. There's no spark of life to breathe into. Her soul has been flayed from her, leaving only scorched ground behind.

She's gone.

"You can't leave me here."

Great hiccuping sobs rack my ribs until my throat is sore from crying over her. My hands shake as I grip the oars. I have to make it back to *The Ruined Soul*. She gave her life, her soul for me. I can't die here and let it be in vain, no matter how much my sinuses ache from crying.

I take three strokes and stop to cover my ears. The whispering of the tide is growing louder.

Join us, Gwendolyn. The pulse of the sea matches my own. Flashes of blue lights strobe beneath the dark surface of the water, webbing out in all directions. I squeeze my eyes shut, refusing to let it capture my attention and pull me over the side of the boat. *Forget your mortal troubles.*

That does sound enticing.

I uncurl my way from the bench and look over the side. I can picture Monarch Darien on their throne of coral, waiting for me to join them and claim my power. In my reflection, a crown of shells and blue starfish forms above my head. The heart of the sea thumps, and the vibration distorts my image in the water.

“No. I won’t be your weapon either. You left me for another realm. You’re no better than Isobel or Grimhilde. You’re a shitty parent too.” I don’t know if the fae ruler can hear me, or if their call is one-sided, but I say my piece anyway. I won’t go live in another realm while my love’s body remains here. I will not leave her soul behind.

The full moon swells behind me and swallows the seashell crown. It’s the sight the mirror showed me on my eighteenth birthday, the one that made Grimhilde go white with fear. It jolts me from my trance. My chest tightens when I see the full moon above me, a real thing that’s always there, even when it’s out of reach.

“You’re still with me,” I remark. “Your light is always with me. I’ve happily devoted my whole life to you. I might have broken some rules, but I only ever did what felt right, and you have never left me.”

I have a mad thought that this is what Grimhilde feared—the woman she raised for greatness, with the power of the moon behind her. Claiming such a gift would make me unstoppable, the villain she made me out to be. I can feel it in my grieving bones. I could drown her kingdom and tear her ports apart. I could bring the world to its knees.

I could bring Morgen back to me.

What I want demands a price, a ritual of sorts. I can’t even think of climaxing right now, so I reach beneath Morgen’s waistband and draw one of her daggers out. Slicing the blade across my forearm, I let the blood run down to my fingers and carve twelve sigils on the wooden boards to represent the members of the Goddess’ own starlight coven.

“I’m not a High Priestess. I have no coven to support me, but I come to you anyways to ask for your help. As you stole back your light from the God of Night and shared it with the human realm, I ask you to share it with me.” I smear the blood over each one of the marks. “Make me your witch, your vessel. Let me shine your light where it’s needed most.”

I’m met with silence. Even the hum of the fae portal has dropped dead. I am a silly little fool, believing so fervently in such things. I want to howl

and stomp my feet and rail against my reality as I've never allowed myself to do before, but it won't work.

I've lost everyone who ever meant anything to me—the servant blues, Shiloh, Jacques, and now Morgen. I hang my head and weep. I'll restart because that's what she wanted, but I'll never be the same.

A plump teardrop splashes between my fingers. It hits the wood and sizzles with a pure white light that burns through to the edges. I watch it closely, calling my magic to join it as another tear drops and mixes with it. My blue glow and the moon's pure light meet.

I swirl my fingers through the air. Thin streams of water loop around my wrists and encircle my torso, lifting my hair as they rise and join to form a flowing halo of saltwater and celestial light. Familiar magic blooms from my heart and reaches its tendrils out to touch the new source of energy as it seeps through my skin. I'm lit up from the outside, and I glow from within. I'm bursting with my own fae charm and the supernatural strength of the Goddess.

I am the ocean's healing waters and the moon that controls the tide.

Cosette can hide away in her cove, but she cannot hold Morgen's soul. The sea witch will answer to me.

"Give her back to me," I call out into the night.

I drape my body over Morgen's and clasp our hands together, weaving my fingers through her limp ones to hold on tightly. In my mind's eye, I can see a jar rattling in a layer of white sand. The lid pops off, and grey smoke wisps away. "Come back to me."

I feel the first touch of Morgen, the very essence of her. She's a tickle along the back of my neck at first, then an overwhelming sensation of loneliness settles on my shoulders. I invite her in, feeling the massive pain and subtle joy of her existence—there's the unnamed grief of being ripped from her mother and never knowing her warmth, followed by the loss of her childhood home and the perpetual fear for her safety.

There's anger that bleeds and self-loathing that scratches its nails down my insides, but I don't push her away. I take it all in, every piece of her and the twinging pressure of her soul pushing at the container of my body. Small spots of comfort make my efforts worth it—the confidence in her crew and the friendship she's fought so hard to never acknowledge. There's Skye's grin and Lilah's eyes turned to the stars. There's Cook's wisdom and Jacques' loyalty.

And my hands are a silky ribbon caressing over the jagged edges of her soul. She loves me, and I love her. I feed Morgen's spirit back into her body, pushing past the pain to stitch every experience into her heart, binding us together. It's a bond that can't be severed despite the tug from the sea witch trying to call her back. I'll never let go of her again.

I channel all of my strength and let the blue and white beams of light rush over me in a crushing wave. I paint the sky with my own aurora. Unbridled magic punches at my ribs and wrings my neck. It's so much power I cannot breathe through it. It steals my senses until I can't see or feel anything but the cool, blinding light. It's enough force to sink ships and crush villages.

"Snow?" The word is a question on a woman's lips, but I'm not on the same plane as her. It's too much to wield and out of my control. If it explodes my body, I will join the stars. I can be so much more.

Is that what I want? I'm holding back for a reason, even if I can't remember it now. I must contain this burst of light, but I'm losing my own will.

"Gwen." I don't know how to stop this deluge of energy. I've forgotten the physical limits of my human form. I'm becoming pure light. Cold hands touch my face, and the sensation grounds me enough to remember a few basic facts. I have a body. A heart. A great love. "Gwendolyn, you need to let go. Come back to me."

A single thread unravels, and I draw it back in. The stiff ribbons begin to soften, one by one, and I curl each one inward. I hear Morgen's voice, but I still can't see her as I absorb the magic back into my heart. I'm not sure what she says, but she speaks gently as I detach myself from the moon's irresistible pull.

"There you are," she whispers, and I flutter my eyes open to the sight of her and the expanse of the ocean all around us. "You can let go now."

I press a hand to my aching chest. The chaotic energy hasn't settled yet. It ripples and rises, searching to break free again.

"But I can still take down everyone who stands against us," I breathe.

"I know you can." Her thumbs rub my cheeks. "But that's not what you want. We have each other. "

"We have each other," I echo.

Morgen is alive and sitting across from me. A wave of euphoria tingles over me as I let go of the last thread of magic, saving it for another day. I

don't need revenge or anything else. My whole world is in this rowboat. I press my forehead to hers, touching her scaly patches and the silky sheet of her hair. We stay like this for a long time, letting our tears of joy splash down our wrists and knees.

"I can't believe we're both here," I say, laughing in disbelief as I kiss her.

"I can. I've always believed in you," she says and cups her hand over my heart. "But we'd better get rowing if we want to get back to the ship and find our way to Corstyliia."

"To Corstyliia," I say and grab the oars. Both of us are shaking and drenched. We start paddling back to *The Ruined Soul*, stopping every few minutes to kiss and hug and laugh at the ridiculous fact that we're here—alive and together.

The ship comes into view, and I think I'm finally home when I see it rocking on a wave.

Paddles feather on the water near the port side.

"What's this?" Morgen asks, tensing and reaching for the harpoon, but she lets go of the weapon and smiles when she sees another small vessel with Skye and Cook rowing toward us.

"Is that you, Snow?" Skye calls. "I take it the palace wasn't to your liking?"

"It wasn't my favorite place," I shout back. Their bow slips past our stern.

"What are you two doing out here?" Morgen asks.

"We came looking for you," Cook answers. "Sampson and Griff said there was something wrong with you. They thought you were trying to stay back in Gentrilly and drink yourself to death."

"They were right. Something is definitely wrong," Skye says. "You look absolutely dreadful. What in the underworld happened in Gentrilly?"

Morgen looks at me. "It's a very long story, and I'm going to tell you the whole thing. But the tale can wait until tomorrow. I want to get my matey warm and tucked into our bed for the night. She did save my soul, after all."

We board *The Ruined Soul*, hands held fast as we hurry back to the cabin, ready to start our life, our home together.

EPILOGUE

MORGEN

The setting sun casts a golden glaze over Corstylia's cliffs, making them appear violet where the waves crash against the black rocks. My heart lifts at the familiar sight. Coming home feels just as exciting as it did that morning when Gwen and I stumbled upon these shores together for the first time.

It's been six years since we dodged the crowd gathered near the docks. The village was alight with gossip, and we feared it would take some time for the news of Gwen's disappearance to die down, but a bigger story stole everyone's attention.

The official statements said that Queen Isobel fell ill and died after learning that her daughter had been snatched from her glass coffin. The High Priestess' broken body was found the next day at the bottom of a salt quarry.

That's what we were told, but strange rumors circulated through the taverns and made their way to the market square. People claimed they'd heard the queen had been poisoned by her own daughter. Some swore they had cousins in the mines who reported that Grimhilde had been wearing iron shoes when she died. They said her flesh was burnt and bubbled as if she'd danced herself to death above a roaring fire.

I suppose we'll never know the truth. We didn't go looking for answers; we were too relieved that neither of them would ever come looking for Gwen.

We spent months in the safety of our cottage, making it a home. Gwen planted a garden, and I tended to a litter of kittens I found in the forest. Gwen threw herself into her work and learned more about her power. She

gave me space as I worked on softening my heart and showed me grace those first few months when I found it so hard to let her all the way in. We wept for the things we lost and pieced ourselves together again. We got to know each other without the restrictions of curses in the privacy of our enchanted wood.

We dug our roots deep into the fertile soil around our cottage and encouraged each other to bloom. We fell in love all over again with the women we became in an environment where we were allowed to thrive.

When we finally emerged from our safe haven, the world was calm around us. No one in Corstyliia pretended to mourn Queen Isobel or the High Priestess. Queen Briallen stayed true to her word and kept the peace. Over time, we began to breathe a little easier and trips out to the village turned into part of our regular routine.

Gwen always believed Corstyliia was a magical place, and now it is. Because she's here.

I lean on my cane as I climb the path, trying to keep the pressure off my left leg. I ache after being out to sea for weeks, but I catch sight of her standing atop the moor with her hair blowing in the gentle breeze, and I quicken my pace.

A group of children is gathered around Gwen, all of them wide-eyed and listening eagerly to the tale she's spinning.

"The fair maiden screamed," she says, clutching her chest. "Her loyal knight couldn't hear her above the storm. She thought she was a goner."

"Oh no!" The four-year-old Milicent covers her eyes.

"Just when she thought she was doomed, the dastardly pirate burst out of her cabin and bellowed, '*Take your hands off the princess!*'" She picks up a stick and waves it in the air. The oldest child, Llewellyn laughs and parries her movements with his toy sword.

I see my chance and take it.

Wrapping an arm around her waist, I grab her from behind. She squeals in surprise and dissolves into a fit of laughter when she sees me. "*Morgen!*"

"And the horrible, rotten, no-good scoundrel of a pirate fought the even worse, smelly pirate of a man," I growl, holding her tight against me. "She never had a single good thought in her head, but she knew she had to protect the beautiful princess."

“Hello, Snowdrop.” I kiss my secret princess on the top of her head, taking in the scent of her hair. Six weeks away from her is far too long. I bring my mouth close to her ear to whisper, “*Gwendolyn.*”

Little Amy twirls around us with a crown of daisies atop her red curls. “Tell us another princess story, please Snowdrop!”

Llewellyn cuts the air with his wooden blade. “No, tell us about the dragons, Morgen! Did you run into any on the sea? Did they breathe fire?”

“There were no dragons this time,” I chuckle. *Thank the gods.*

“That’s enough for today, children,” Mrs. Smithley calls. “I’m sure the captain is tired after her long journey.”

The frail woman wipes her newborn babe’s mouth with the edge of her brown apron and waves to us. I tip my hat to the newest addition to her crew. Mrs. Smithley is still here to take care of all five of her children, thanks to Gwen. That’s why she’s so beloved around here. She doesn’t use her magic to make herself the center of the world; she shares her gifts so that others may keep theirs intact.

“Snowdrop and I will be back tomorrow,” I tell them. “We’ll have to work on your slashing technique, Llew.” I eye the boy’s sword. He grins and runs off to cling to his mother’s skirts.

I release Gwen when I feel her rummaging in the pockets of her white linen gown. She pulls out two small bags and tucks them into Mrs. Smithley’s apron.

“Steep the fenugreek blend and drink the tea twice a day to keep your milk supply up,” she instructs. “Chew one tablet in the morning to stop you from getting with child again, but tell Arthur to stay off of you until you’re fully healed, or else I’ll give him a tonic to make a certain appendage stop working properly.”

Mrs. Smithley snorts a laugh. “Thank you, Snowdrop. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“You’re back early,” she says dreamily once they’re gone.

“I told the crew I had to get back to see you,” I tell her. “I’ve missed you, my witch of the woods.”

I trace the fresh batch of freckles over the bridge of her nose before running a hand over the loose brown waves of her hair falling to her waist.

“I missed you more.” She touches the leather bag slung over my shoulder. “Did you bring me my sweets?”

“Of course I brought you your sweets, my love. Have I ever come home empty-handed?”

“Never,” she says, smiling. “Tell me you won’t be taking off to sea again anytime soon.”

“Skye can manage on their own until after the summer is over.”

“We’ll have the whole summer together,” she says, practically humming with excitement. “I think I’ll join you in autumn.”

“Oh gods, it would be wonderful to have you aboard again.”

She hasn’t sailed in a year. Too many people need her here, just as my crew needs me. We’ve built a whole life on this island as well as on the sea, but I try to stay home most months, and I never agree to any trips that last longer than six weeks. I avoid Cosette’s cove the same way Gwen avoids the beach when she’s alone. The sirens haven’t bothered me since that night Gwen called me back to my body and I found her with her eyes as wide and white as the moon itself.

“But for now let’s get you home,” she says. There’s no hint of the power I know she holds within when she lifts her warm golden eyes to meet mine. “The cats have missed you too.”

I keep one arm around Gwen’s waist as we ride our grey mare into the forest. My hand wanders up her body, and I feel the stiff boning of her stays beneath the light fabric of her gown. I lean over her shoulder.

“What’s this?” I trail a finger up to touch the ribbon tied between her breasts. “I thought I was surprising you.”

“I’ve come to expect your surprises,” she says, leaning into me. “I wanted to be prepared for your arrival this time around.”

I can’t wait to get her out of this gown.

Night has fallen over the forest by the time the cottage comes into view. It’s a small, plain structure, but it’s cozy with its beige stone exterior. Gwen painted the doors and shutters lavender for a pop of color only we can see. Wisteria drips over the brown shingle roof, and the moonflowers I planted for our anniversary are in full bloom in the garden bed. The rich scent of mossy soil wafts beneath the perfume of wildflowers. It smells like home.

I walk Rhiannon back to the stables while Gwen heads inside. She’s lighting the candles on her altar when I push the door open, and I’m greeted by a black cat rubbing against my ankles. A lantern glows beneath a tapestry that tells the true story of a Moon Coven guard who presented a

boar's heart to trick the former High Priestess and buy her lover some time as she fled the temple.

"I have seaweed strips soaking in saltwater," she says, blowing out a match. Smoke wisps around her face. "Would you like me to wrap your leg?"

The scales have never healed quite right, and my left leg pains me often, but I'm not thinking about that right now.

"I have another source of comfort in mind," I murmur, running my eyes over her simple gown, loving how it skims her curves. "The wraps can wait."

She rises and pulls me by the collar, unbuttoning my blouse to run her hands over my body and loosen my hair from its plait. I brace a hand on the wall as we move into the bedroom. Moonlight spills over the bed.

"Lie down, love," she says. "You've had a long journey. Let me take care of you tonight."

I step out of my trousers and stretch out on the quilt. She drops her gown, revealing the swell of her breasts above her ivory satin stays. I want her. I always want her—my matey, my love, my wife, my precious snow white. She hitches her sheer petticoat up around her knees, dancing for me and inching the garment up higher until I can see the wetness gleaming on her thighs and cunt. She slips one finger through her folds, and I press up to my forearms to watch her rub over the slick swell of her pearl.

"You know I didn't just bring sweets home," I rasp. "I found a new treasure for our chest."

"Is that so?" she asks, dipping into her slippery cleft to tease me.

"I think you're going to love this one."

"I'm sure I will if you use it on me," she says, crawling onto the bed to straddle me. "But the treasure can wait. We have all night, and I have other sources of pleasure in mind." She drags her fingers over my lips, and I suck them into my mouth, closing my eyes as I taste her. She grinds her hips against mine, and I rise to meet her, pulling the ribbon on her stays. I graze my fingers over the curve of each tit before circling her nipples. I match the rhythm of her swaying hips, and it doesn't take long for that intense ache of need between us to shift into a hot, deep buzz of joy.

We share our bodies for hours with the tendrils of her magic slipping deep into my soul, drawing me closer to her in a way that no one else could ever understand. Even when I'm away, I can feel these threads that

bind us together. I try to wrap my love around her heart so that she feels me just as strongly, pouring all of my affection into her as we flow together, not stopping until we're both satisfied and completely spent.

I startle awake at some point in the night, as I do sometimes. I'm expecting the cold floor beneath me, but we're curled up together on our soft mattress, enveloped in the comfort of Gwen's cool light.

I loosen a breath and tuck my knees beneath her thighs, feeling her stir.

"Did you have a nightmare?" she asks, scraping her nails lightly over my forearms. "We can stay up and talk about it."

"No nightmares tonight," I assure her with a kiss. "Only sweet dreams."

I soak in the details I've been missing so much these past few weeks—the way her body fits against mine, the rise and fall of her ribs against my chest, and the chirping sound of katydids outside our cottage walls.

She falls back to sleep in my arms, and I lie awake knowing we have a full summer's worth of this bliss to look forward to. We have our happily ever after.

SNEAK PEEK...

Want to know how Grimhilde got her iron shoes?

Read on for a sneak peek of a companion novella coming soon...

OF SALT AND FURY

THE MAN IN THE MIRROR

I sink back into the shadows once Grimhilde leaves. She hasn't cleared the summoning runes, so I must wait here until she returns. I can't wander the hall of reflections to pass the time.

There's no sense in trying to break out of this prison. I gave up on that years ago. But sometimes I get the urge to beat my hands against the black stone until they're bloody and broken. I try to make myself comfortable with my surroundings instead, searching for any slight change in the scrying room to cure my boredom.

Something rustles at the window. Perhaps it's a windy day in Lavinsar. I close my eyes and remember how the breeze always left a coat of salt on my skin. The window creaks, lifting slowly.

I jolt up, pressing my hands to the surface, watching the glazed pane lift inch by inch. This can't be real. The tower is so tall no one could make that climb. My heart pounds with fear and excitement—two emotions I haven't felt in decades. I'm praying that this intruder will make it to safety.

I clench my teeth until I fear my jaw will snap. I hear a grunt and wait for the inevitable scream when the body plummets and smashes against the clay ground below us.

But an exhalation follows a soft *thump* against the stone floor. A man crouches below the gilded mirror frame, his ribs expanding as he catches his breath. Sweat makes his white shirt transparent, so I can see the cut of his muscles through the fabric. Golden blond hair hangs over his face. He tosses it back as he rises, leaving his pile of ropes and grappling hooks near the wall.

He looks at the scrying mirror, blinking. He stands close enough to me that I would feel the heat on his skin if I was in the room with him. He can't see me unless he touches the summoning runes, but I can study his features from my strange vantage point.

His brown eyes are familiar. He bears a striking similarity to the guard Grimhilde killed in this room. *Shiloh*. I suck in a breath, realizing what he's here for. Revenge. I know who he is. Jakob. He's the one they call Fury in the mines.

His hands hover over the marks drawn in the tray of sand, and he traces over them lightly. My whole body tingles as I become visible to him. His mouth drops open.

"The man in the mirror," he gasps before his brow furrows. "Why did you tell such vile lies about my sister?"

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